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Block grant system could harm rural health care

Record Searchlight

By: Louis J. Ward & Abe Hathaway

California today has a brighter and healthier landscape, with millions more residents now enjoying access to safe and affordable health care. As the CEO and Board President of Mayers Memorial Hospital District, the only hospital in a coverage area larger than many east coast states as well as the area's largest employer, we hope this message gets the attention it deserves as the new administration and congressional session get underway in Washington, D.C. Change is coming to the nation's capital, but expanded health care coverage should continue to be a big part of the agenda.

California, with more than 39 million residents, has seen enormous benefits from recent health care reform. Thanks to support from Washington, the state has been able to ensure that an additional 3.7 million children, seniors and members of working families have gained access to

affordable, high-quality health care programs and services. Today, more than one in three Californians can look forward to expert health care coverage through the state's successful Medi-Cal program.

That expanded access to health care is paying enormous dividends, not just in individual health, but also in terms of economic prosperity and greater educational success. Children, by far the largest group that benefits, can receive regular medical checkups and screening to ensure good physical, vision and dental health. They can receive proper medication and inoculation to prevent or treat illness. It means more regular school attendance and greater education achievements.

Working families, who previously could not afford vital preventative care, routine examinations and medicine, now have access to those services. Many who have never had regular

medical attention are able to receive proactive, preventative care to detect or manage chronic conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure or high cholesterol. This expanded coverage means healthier communities and fewer illness-related absences from the workplace. That contributes to a stronger economic climate.

For California's seniors, it means a stronger, more robust safety net of care to help develop a happier and healthier lifestyle. It means reduced dependence on expensive care in emergency rooms and a greater ability to prevent debilitating disease and chronic conditions.

Across California's far-flung First Congressional District, health care reform has been especially effective in reaching rural communities. In Shasta, Butte, Lassen, Placer and Nevada Counties, the changes have allowed approximately 74,000 residents to enroll in Medi-

Cal for the first time. Funding available through reform efforts has been enormously important to facilities like Mayers Memorial Hospital District, Enloe Medical Center, Oroville Hospital, Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital and Plumas District Hospital as they work to serve their communities.

The benefits to the state's job climate, the effectiveness of its schools, and its overall quality of life are impossible to understate. Access to care means a vital investment in the state's future prosperity.

As policy discussions take shape in Washington, D.C., it is important to ensure that millions of people not lose the health care protections that currently exist. If California loses funding targeted for expansion of Medi-Cal, or of its hospital fee program, which provides health care for more than 13 million Californians, is replaced with a block grant system, these changes would mean wholesale disruption.

As the presidential transition process continues, we believe our elected leaders in Congress share our goal of ensuring people have access to coverage and care. We have made enormous progress to serve the best interests of the public, patients and those who provide health care. We

believe that protecting that progress is vital to California's future.

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