



# CAPITOL WEEKLY

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## Budget pain: Cutting vital programs misses the human element

By Frank Mecca | 02/11/10 12:00 AM PST

The Senate budget hearings this week mark the beginning of Sacramento's annual ritual of budget warfare, with lawmakers blaming each other and the federal government for cuts to important services. But what should not get lost in this blame game over budget priorities is the effect these cuts will have on real people.

After several years of cuts to vital services, lawmakers in favor of cuts will try to gloss over the consequences of their actions and emphasize the budget's bottom line in their arguments, but their cuts to human service programs such as CalWORKs and IHSS will have real consequences for struggling Californians. Cuts to important support services will significantly impact the quality of life for working families -- families like Steve and Linda in Sonoma County.

A couple in their 50s, Steve and Linda have two adult children and have worked throughout their adult lives. But recently Steve was laid off after his company outsourced his job, and Linda became sick and needed surgery. When Linda returned from her sick leave, her hours were cut in half. With few options left, the couple liquidated all of their assets, except for their home, which they are now in danger of losing. They are now applying for assistance from county human service agencies for the first time.

Cuts to vital programs would also hurt families like the Garrs of El Dorado County. Brian Garr, father of four, was a mechanical engineer and project manager for the last 16 years who was laid off late last year when his company moved out of the area. Mr. Garr has applied for numerous jobs, but just getting an interview has been difficult. Unable to pay bills and facing foreclosure on their home, the family, which includes three children with special needs, now relies on unemployment insurance and food stamps. Once unemployment insurance runs out, the Garrs will be left with applying for CalWORKs for any income support in the absence of a job. They will only be able to qualify for CalWORKs, however, after they lose their home.

In the midst of one of the most dismal job markets in decades and a state with one of the nation's highest unemployment rates, programs like CalWORKs, Food Stamps, and other vital services provide the assistance that out-of-work Californians, from the impoverished to middle-class families, need to keep their heads above water during their search for employment.

But the budget proposed by the governor would drastically undercut job creation by eliminating hundreds of thousands of jobs, making the recession worse, and shredding safety net programs and services that families and individuals need to get back to work.

Budget cuts over the past several years have already done severe damage to safety net services and to the ability of California families to get back on their feet. The governor's most recent budget proposal would slash a program already on life support and eliminate it entirely if it does not receive federal funding -- a move that would spell disaster for families and children who are already barely hanging on.

His proposed 15.7 percent cut to CalWORKS, the state's highly successful welfare to work program, on top of a 4 percent reduction last year, expects families to feed their children at 1989 prices. The proposed \$200 million in cuts to child care services that help poor working families transitioning off CalWORKs will prevent thousands of unemployed people from getting back to work.

But that's not all. The impacts on struggling California families would grow much worse under the governor's plan if the state fails to collect \$6.9 billion in increased federal payments for state programs. In the absence of additional federal dollars, the governor proposes to eliminate the entire CalWORKS program that provides for the most basic needs of nearly one million impoverished families with children.

It is critical that we work hard to support families now, rather than let this recession force families into long-term poverty.

If the governor is serious about making "jobs, jobs, jobs" his legacy, he and the Legislature must hold the line on further cuts to the safety net and properly fund the services that protect families and children.

Note: the names of the individuals in this article have been changed to preserve their privacy. Their stories have been provided by directors of human service agencies in Sonoma and El Dorado County.

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