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Opinion: State budget cuts put San Mateo county children in harm's way

By
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In 2008, San Mateo County was the first county in California and among the first in the nation to create and sign a Bill of Rights for Children and Youth. This bill of rights recognizes that too many children and youth live in a state of crisis and too few have a voice in the decisions that will affect them over their lifetimes. The county board of supervisors, along with local cities, school districts, PTAs and child advocacy groups, resolved to invest in children and youth so that:

They have freedom from mistreatment, abuse and neglect.

They have a voice in matters that affect them.

They have a sense of hope for their future.

Our county has done its best to keep these commitments to children. Over the past four years, the state has reduced funding for child welfare services, forcing our county to contribute additional local dollars to prevent child abuse, restore families, teach parenting classes and create permanent, loving homes for children and youth.

BEVERLY BEASLEY JOHNSON is the director of San Mateo County Human Services Agency. She wrote this article for this newspaper.

Last year, the governor made a devastating unilateral decision to veto \$80 million in funding for child welfare services. What did that mean for San Mateo County's children? A staggering loss of \$1.4 million, nearly 10 percent of our funding from the state. Thus far, we've been able to maintain services to the 4,400 San Mateo County children we come into contact with annually, but in my 33 years of service, I have never seen such severe and dramatic cuts to child welfare

services. More are on the horizon.

The governor has proposed to:

Extend the \$80 million cut into a second year, resulting in an additional loss of \$53 million in federal matching dollars.

Eliminate a statewide transitional housing program, which serves 44 at-risk youth in our county.

In addition, group homes have received a 32 percent cut in reimbursements, making it harder for them to provide care and shelter for abused and neglected children. Unable to afford the high cost of living in the Bay Area, we are already seeing group homes close, which means that our children will be placed in distant counties, far from their families, friends and schools, which will weaken their fragile connections to the people who care about them.

We cannot abandon our county's children. And we cannot forsake their long-term well-being simply because they don't have a voice in Sacramento. We must continue to give our children a sense of hope for their future and build a communitywide network to protect children and youth from harm, whether that harm comes from abuse or neglect or from hasty policy decisions.

San Mateo County has led the state by adopting a Bill of Rights for Children and Youth, thereby recognizing that young people are valuable assets to our community. It is time for the state to recognize that children and youth embody all of our hopes for our community and take steps to provide them with the resources they need to grow up safe, healthy and strong.

Over the next weeks and months, the Legislature and the governor will make critical decisions that will directly impact the safety and security of children in our county, the very children who are most at risk. We need our state decision-makers to embrace, support and defend the rights of children and youth to be free from harm. Our children and youth deserve it.