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Communities of Color Hit Hardest by Health Cuts, Advocates Say

by David Gorn

Health care officials and advocates expressed serious concern over Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown's latest round of budget proposals that include reductions to community clinics, hospitals, and programs such as Healthy Families and CalWORKs.

"We have much more need than resources to provide for it," Diana Dooley, secretary of California's Health and Human Services Agency, said in a conference call with stakeholders. "I fully understand your concern. These are consequential reductions. All of these cuts have consequences."

Both health officials and advocates seem a little weary of the constant and continued reductions. According to Ellen Wu of the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, acknowledging that the reductions are hard is getting a little harder to hear.

"The cuts from last year were hard. The cuts from a few years ago were hard. We're getting beyond hard now," said Wu, who sits on the Managed Risk Medical Insurance Board, which would have \$152 million cut from its budget in Brown's proposal.

"You know, we keep using the word 'devastating,' and now that's so overused. Clearly, [as a state,] we don't look long term, or even medium term. We are crippling the state, we are crippling our ability to be productive, to compete, our infrastructure," she said. "I don't know how much more Californians can take, or how much California can take."

Many of the people who use social service programs such as Healthy Families are lower income, and that means communities of color, who are disproportionately lower income, Wu said.

What most people don't understand, she said, is that eliminating health services doesn't just hurt recipients of those services, it affects the productivity of the whole state.

"About 60% of Californians are from communities of color. So we're actually talking about the majority of California here," Wu said. "These people are the backbone of our state, and you're not allowing them to stay healthy, not allowing them to have child care so they can keep their job, and that impacts the prosperity of California."

Health care services make up a huge chunk of California's budget, so it makes sense that officials would look to cut them during any budget reduction process, Wu said. But if children miss school because of a lack of dental and health care, if parents lose their jobs for lack of child care, she said, that creates a larger problem.

"I don't think health care is as immediate to everyone in the mainstream," Wu said. "But there's a ripple effect. We talk about health policy and you think, well, some people won't get their health care. But there is a broader population health. And there's the health of the state. People won't be as productive, and kids won't learn as much. And that's our future."