

"Taking from kids who have so little"

Statewide coalition fights cuts to programs for low-income families

By Jean Tepperman

"My daughter Jasmine, who's nine, spoke in a budget hearing in Sacramento in December," says Oakland resident Vivian Hain. "At the end she said, 'Governor Schwarzenegger, you promised that kids would come first. So what is it? Disabled and poor children, we don't count?'"

Hain and her daughter, along with a dozen other families, traveled to Sacramento December 10 to protest Governor Schwarzenegger's proposed mid-year budget cuts to programs serving low-income families. They joined hundreds who had gathered there to protest proposed limits on services for disabled children and adults.

Hain's group was organized by the California Partnership, a coalition of 60 organizations advocating for low-income families. More than 500 other Partnership members joined the protest by fax and phone, says Rebecca Vilkomerson, northern California Partnership organizer.

Throughout December, in a series of hearings and press conferences in Sacramento, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, low-income families charged that political leaders are "asking sacrifices from the poor, seniors, and children, but they are not asking sacrifices from rich people," in the words of Dae Yoon, program director at the Korean Resource Center in Los Angeles.



L.A. COALITION TO END HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS

Low-income parents and their supporters held a press conference in L.A. December 4 to protest proposed cuts.

Her employer pays for her health insurance, but Bush, a single mother who receives no child support, says she can't afford to add seven-year-old Natalia to the policy.

Without health insurance, her daughter can't get the fillings she needs for her cavities. When she's sick, Bush says, "I have to take her to the community clinic, but that means I have to take many hours off work, because the clinic is always packed and they don't make appointments. If I see that my daughter is getting sick, I wait and wonder, 'Should I take her in?'"

Bush, who works as an asthma educator, adds that many of the families she visits are on Medi-Cal. The governor's proposal to cut Medi-Cal payments to doctors "would make it more difficult for the children to see a doctor," she says, "because they already pay so little that doctors don't want to treat Medi-Cal patients."

Bush calls the governor's proposed cuts "disgusting—he said he was going to concentrate on fraud and waste, but this is taking away from kids who already have so little."

CalWORKs cuts

The proposed 5% cut in CalWORKs grants and the cancellation of the CalWORKs cost of living increase "would be drastic" for her family, says Oakland resident Sylvia Darensberg. The mother of three teenagers and an active member of Low Income Families Empowerment Through Education (LIFETIME), Darensberg attends Chabot Community College and works temporary jobs in hospitals. "I get CalWORKs as a backup," she says. "I get child support from their father but it's not consistent enough to rely on."

Darensberg's pay plus her welfare check add up to \$1,400 a month; she pays \$1,250 a month in rent. She receives \$272 a month in food stamps—"not enough with three teenagers, so toward the end of the month we have to food-bank it."

The 5% cut would subtract about \$40 from her income. What would she give up? "Right now giving up heat!" she says. "I only have a one-room heater. I

don't have a car. I pay the water bill, PG&E, phone—that would be the luxury that would go, the phone."

Darensberg's message to Schwarzenegger: The proposed cuts "will break the backs of the poor and then you're going to have problems. More people will become homeless and the crime rate will go up."

Cap on programs for immigrants

Since 1996, federal funds have been cut off for legal immigrants receiving food stamps, family welfare benefits, health care, and income for elderly and disabled people. But "in California we've been battling to make sure people had access to food assistance and health care," says Isabel Alegria, policy analyst for the Immigrant Welfare Collaborative. California has been providing these benefits with state money, but now the governor proposes to limit the number of immigrants who can receive them. "One of our big agendas is to make sure these programs continue," Alegria says.

"We have our voices"

The L.A. Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness (LACEHH), Parent Voices, LIFETIME, ACORN, and other grassroots groups advocating for low-income families formed the California Partnership two years ago. "What we have on our side is people," says Alegria. "We don't have money, but we have our voices. Especially now, we'll need to be a strong and unified voice to advocate for low-income people." Past Partnership actions included:

- A 2002 town hall meeting in Los Angeles, where groups from low-income communities advocated for more family-friendly federal welfare policies.
- A Sacramento lobby day last May, which brought almost 300 people from low-income communities to resist cuts to service programs and push revenue plans such as a tax increase on very high incomes.
- A successful campaign to persuade L.A. supervisors to use unspent CalWORKs money to support job training programs and emergency homelessness prevention funds.

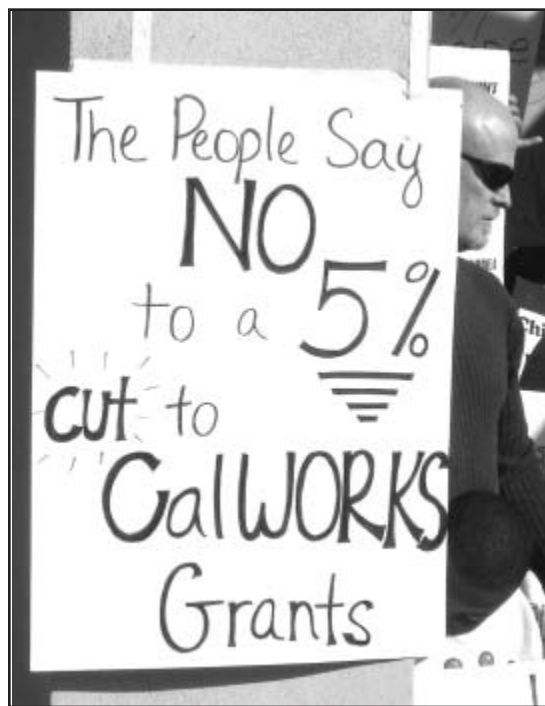
Agenda for '04

In mapping strategies for the new year, the California Partnership will continue fighting against service cuts and for increasing state revenues. "It's not fair that the governor is only looking at social service programs and not looking to wealthy people and corporations to take a share of the burden," says Nancy Berlin, coordinator of the Welfare Reform Advocacy Project of LACEHH. Other plans for the year include:

- **Education first:** The California Partnership will push CalWORKs "to move from a 'work first' philosophy to 'education first,'" says Vilkomerson, so parents on welfare can prepare for jobs that will really support their families.
- **End to time limits:** LIFETIME will campaign for an end to the five-year lifetime limit on CalWORKs. The group is surveying parents who have "timed out" and in February will release a report showing that many had not received services they needed to succeed in the work force. "The state didn't keep its end of the bargain," says Diana Spatz, LIFETIME executive director.
- **Voter education:** The Partnership will launch a voter registration and voter education campaign, so low-income families and advocates can move beyond "mobilizing at the last minute" to taking a more proactive approach, says Vilkomerson. The group has developed a training on voting rights and the importance of voting, to be given first within member organizations, so members can learn to train other groups.

California Partnership

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L.A. COALITION TO END HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS

Speakers at the L.A. press conference opposed cuts in poor families' incomes.

Cuts to health insurance

If the proposed cap on Healthy Families, low-cost health insurance for children in low-income families, passes, "in a year, we expect there would be 100,000 children on the waiting list," says Idabelle Fosse, Southern California regional organizer for Health Access.

Los Angeles resident Esther Bush is now waiting for her daughter's Healthy Families application to go through. Bush was on Medi-Cal until last June, when a pay raise made her ineligible.

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