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Opinion

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Success story for kids' health



MARK WEBER

WHAT an incredible success the Children's Health Initiative is turning out to be. Its goal, is ambitious: making Santa Clara County the first in the nation to have health coverage for all its children. Yet today, little more than a year since the idea was proposed, that goal looks remarkably attainable.

Editorial
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What a credit to the initiative's visionary sponsors — Working Partnerships USA, the local labor-affiliated research group, and People Acting in Community Together (PACT), the faith-based neighborhood organizers. They not only sold Santa Clara County and San Jose on the idea, but they're out on the street helping to make it happen.

Tuesday's Mercury News story by Michelle Guido told the compelling tale. More than 15,000 of the county's 70,000 uninsured children have been enrolled in insurance plans

since January, an astonishing rate of about 100 each weekday. This far exceeds the sponsors' most optimistic predictions.

The initiative first was proposed as a San Jose program to take advantage of revenue from the national tobacco lawsuit settlement. The city's unenthusiastic reception sent the sponsors to the more receptive county — and it's just

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as well. San Jose eventually came on board, and the county-wide program is far better.

Much of the funding goes toward signing kids up for existing state and federal programs — Medi-Cal, for families near the federal poverty line, and Healthy Families, for the working poor. In too much of California, parents aren't

aware of Healthy Families. Here county workers and other groups, including PACT, get out the word. Like successful outreach programs in Stockton and Shasta County, this one is proving that low-income parents who know about Healthy Families sign up for it.

The initiative still faces major challenges.

One is retention. Some plans require small premium payments, and families tend to let them slide in lean times. Legislation calling for Healthy Families insurance premiums to be deducted from paychecks would help, but that's just in the talking stages.

Another challenge is sorting out which ethnic or other groups within the county may be under-served by the outreach so far, and targeting

them.

But the greatest challenge is fundraising: About half the \$14 million annual cost of the program must come from private sources. Calpine and Hewlett Packard are early contributors. But the slowing economy will make money harder to raise at the same time it leaves more children in need of help.

There is no one remedy for the growing gap between rich and poor in this county, so we need to attack individual symptoms. The Housing Trust of Santa Clara County, noted here Tuesday, is tackling affordable housing. The Children's Health Initiative is an even more ambitious effort calling on government and the private sector.

A healthy child does better in school and has a better chance of escaping poverty. Community leaders in and out of public office who've been part of this initiative should be proud of what they've accomplished — and of the example they're setting for the nation.

For information on these programs