

First 5 catching families as they fall through state's safety net

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Amid uncertainty about state-funded support for needy families, a little-known program paid for by a tobacco tax and grants has become a steady beacon of hope for many.

For 12 years now, First 5 California has been providing medical and dental care, parent training, preschool tuition, preschool teacher training, speech therapy and other services for low-income children.

The objective is to give disadvantaged kids the best chance to succeed in school and in life so they can contribute to society as adults, said Michelle Fadelli, public affairs director of First 5's Marin County branch.

"The idea behind First 5 is that the first five years of a child's life are the most crucial to their development," said Fadelli, who also serves as spokeswoman for Bay Area First 5s. "The aim is to help them get a good start."

A half-million Bay Area children age 5 and under, and families, benefitted from at least one First 5 service in 2009, according to program statistics.

Through First 5 in 2009, about 17,000 Bay Area kids received health insurance, 14,500 received dental care, and 35,000 were screened for developmental disabilities and special educational needs. Thousands of parents received education and child safety advice.

First 5 also helped 31,000 Bay Area children prepare for school. The organization provided preschool, summer kindergarten preparation, structured play groups, and literacy programs.

County welfare directors can rely on First 5 services as state funding is being cut, said Joe Valentine, Contra Costa County's director of employment and human services.

For example, one of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's budget-balancing cuts would be to eliminate CalWORKs, a key support system for low-income parents. CalWORKs pays parents a stipend to supplement their incomes while they are working or in training for work.

"First 5 is maintaining investment in programs that will reduce the need for social services," Valentine said. "They are providing a reliable source of help to keep children out of the child welfare system and help parents juggle their responsibilities."

Early childhood programs for the disadvantaged reduce costs to society from \$1.80 to \$17.07 for each dollar spent, according to a recent Rand Corp. study cited by First 5.

Most of First 5's funding comes from a 1998 tobacco tax, but boards of directors in each county add to it with help from private charities, such as the Walnut Creek-based Thomas J. Long Foundation.

Alameda County's First 5 branch has an annual budget of nearly \$25 million, with \$16 million of that coming from the tobacco tax and the rest from grants and reserves, said Chief Executive Officer Mark Friedman. The agency provided help to 37,638 children in 2008-09, using 3,131 providers.

First 5 Alameda County has 55 social workers, nurses, early childhood specialist and early education specialists on staff and contracts out some of its work.

One of its programs supplements the county's child-abuse prevention programs, Friedman said.

"We do early intervention work when calls come in to the child abuse hot line and child protective services," he said.

Another program trains workers for community clinics, screens mothers for depression, educates and supports teen parents and mothers facing high-risk births.

An early childhood mental health program provides psychotherapy for children who have been exposed to violence and neglect or have parents with substance abuse problems, Friedman said.

"Children's problems are often the direct result of instability in the family," he said.

Contra Costa First 5 has a \$17.2 million annual budget with about \$9.3 million coming from the tobacco tax and the rest from grants, interest and reserves, Executive Director Sean Casey said.

The Contra Costa branch operates six centers — in Richmond, San Pablo, Concord, Bay Point, Pittsburg and Antioch — where parents can go for services and to meet other parents, Casey said. The agency helps about 15,000 families a year.

"We target the areas where people need the most support, the lowest-performing schools and the highest poverty rates," Casey said. "Parents' mental health, feeling that they are not alone, is a really important base for the child's healthy development."