

# Armando X. Ochoa: Save indigent medical care

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After 30 years of providing specialty care to the medically indigent of our county through the Medically Indigent Services Program (MISP), the Fresno County Board of Supervisors is poised to end a program that has helped thousands of members of our community when they were without medical insurance and had serious health issues.

On New Year's Eve day, our Board of Supervisors initiated this tragic yet legal process and is suggesting that they do not have the money to continue the program.

As a pastor of many of the people who have depended on this program and who will suffer greatly if it is significantly reduced or ended, I think about the human cost.

This issue must not be reduced to a discussion about budgets and legal obligations. The discussion must focus on the face of the poor, those in our community — our neighbors — who are struggling every day to make ends meet.

As just one example, one of our parishioners — out of respect for his privacy, I will call him Jose — has lived in Fresno County for more than 10 years. Jose and his wife are raising three children. He works as a laborer during the day, while operating his own small business on evenings and weekends.

However, he does not have employer-based health insurance and cannot afford to purchase insurance for himself and his wife. Fortunately, his children have Medi-Cal. When he needed surgery, that he could not afford, Jose qualified for MISP and was able to receive the help he needed. Without this assistance he would most likely have been homeless.

There are hundreds of individuals who, like Jose, are hardworking members of our community.

They either do not earn enough to purchase health insurance, are not offered insurance where they work, or they simply are not eligible for Medi-Cal. Just as these individuals have the inalienable right to life and liberty, they also have the right to health.

Time Magazine's Man of the Year, Pope Francis, in his first encyclical letter to his church and the world, *Evangelii Gaudium*, said, "God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself 'became poor' (2 Corinthians 8:9)."

Pope Francis goes on to say, "The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it."

As the Board of Supervisors considers what to do with MISP and the new landscape created by Medi-Cal expansion, I suggest the following be seriously considered:

First, do not act without broad input from the community. Transparency and engagement of the community to seek creative solutions is simply good governance.

Second, do not eliminate services for the poor of our county. Do not become the first county in California among the counties that offer services to everyone regardless of immigration status to step away from this crucial safety net for thousands of people.

Third, remember you are not just eliminating a program, you are literally locking the door to residents of Fresno who have no other recourse for specialty medical care. This decision is about people in need, their basic human rights and Fresno County's responsibility to use our tax dollars for their good health.

The measure of any society is how it cares for the poor and vulnerable. I urge people of all faith traditions and all Fresnans of good will to lift up your voice and let our supervisors know that we support MISP and the people it serves. I encourage you to call your supervisor today, express your opinion and ask that MISP be preserved.

Armando X. Ochoa is bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fresno.

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