

EDITORIAL: Fresno County must keep indigent health care

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By The Bee Editorial Board

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When it's time to pick the grapes, tomatoes and lettuce, most everyone praises farmworkers -- many of whom are here from Mexico.

But the reality is that much farm work is seasonal and wages typically are low. Thus the question for many families that work the fields is: How do we pay for medical care?

For 30 years, Fresno County has provided health care for the undocumented. Not because it's the right thing to do -- which it is -- but because a 1984 court injunction requires the county to do so.

On New Year's Eve, the county went to court to lift the injunction. The county said that a loss of \$14 million in state funding made it financially impossible to continue the Medically Indigent Services Program.

Superior Court Judge Donald S. Black questioned why the county needed an immediate ruling, since it "waited until the 11th hour to bring it up." Clinica Sierra Vista, which operates community health centers in Fresno, asked to intervene in the case, and Black continued the hearing until last week at its request.

Black made a tentative ruling against the county last Tuesday. He said the evidence does not show that it's "financially infeasible" for the county to provide services to the indigent. According to the county, approximately 4,500 undocumented people use MISP, which costs about \$5,000 per person annually.

The county, however, can request a hearing on Black's tentative ruling and will discuss its next step during closed session of Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting.

We urge supervisors to end the hypocrisy of extolling the virtues of agriculture but not wanting to provide health care for people who pick many of the crops.

We additionally urge supervisors to fund MISP. Dropping the program will only send more people to overcrowded emergency rooms, where care is more expensive than if a patient is treated by a primary-care physician.

Black said in his latest ruling that the county failed to show the "ends of justice would be served" by dissolving the injunction, because that would result in a "large segment of the population" without health care -- along with a "potential impact on an even larger segment of the population."

Armando X. Ochoa, bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fresno, said it best in a Feb. 24 op-ed in The Bee: "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."