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## Panel starts to plan \$48.5 million in cuts to local early-childhood programs

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The First 5 Sacramento Commission on Monday began what is expected to become a wrenching process of cutting \$48.5 million from local early-childhood programs.

The cuts have been necessitated by reductions from the state, where members of both legislative houses have agreed to take \$950 million from First 5 agencies in counties across California. Tobacco taxes fund First 5 and its programs.

The one-time reallocation is being done to help close the state's massive budget deficit.

To handle the loss of funds in Sacramento County, First 5 staff members have recommended program cuts that commissioners reviewed Monday and will vote on next month. They include programs for school readiness, breast-feeding, water fluoridation and more.

More than 30 program workers and recipients spoke to the board, highlighting some of the tough choices commissioners face.

"It's going to be awful," commissioner Scott Moak said. "We're talking about decisions that are going to hurt the community."

Toni Moore, First 5 Sacramento executive director, said the staff prioritized programs based on the need to provide safety net services, the need to serve low-income communities, and other priorities established by the commission. The cuts will be phased in over five years.

County officials have increasingly relied on First 5 to provide funding for safety-net programs, such as Child Protective Services, as they have made cuts to their own programs in recent years. CPS was spared any cuts in the current First 5 proposal.

Under the state budget plan, most counties will lose half of what their bank balance was on June 30, 2010. For Sacramento County, that works out to \$48.5 million.

The biggest cut would come from a water fluoridation program scheduled to start this year and intended to address dental problems in parts of the county without fluoridation.

One option for the commission would take \$16 million from the program. Another would eliminate the program altogether – at a savings of nearly \$30 million.

With fewer programs to manage, First 5 Sacramento will shed some of its own staff, with a

proposed reduction of about half its staff, down to 11 employees. That would produce \$3.5 million in savings over five years.

Much of the testimony Monday came from advocates for a breast-feeding program slated for a \$2.2 million cut. The Women, Infants and Children program would lose half its First 5 funding under the current proposal.

"Breast-feeding is a protection against poor outcomes in general," said Laurie True, executive director of the California WIC Association.

Obesity, diabetes and other problems are less likely to occur with breast-fed children, she said.

School readiness programs - basically preschool in low-income areas - would lose a fourth of their First 5 funding for three years, a total of \$2.4 million.

Several school administrators spoke in favor of continued funding on Monday, saying the programs have played an important role in communities without many other prevention programs.

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