

Why shifting health care costs to employees is a bad idea.

For everybody.

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The Health of All Is at Stake in the Grocery Strike

By Gary Payinda and Luisa Blue

Something is missing in all the talk about the supermarket lockouts and strike: the effect of health-care cost-shifting on the health of California's families and the care that professionals like us provide.

Because costs have been shifted to working people whose budgets are already stretched to the limit, health care increasingly is delivered not in doctors' offices but in hospital emergency rooms and an ever-shrinking number of public clinics — or not at all.

The choice that Californians must make about the future of health care is this: Do we let big corporations destroy affordable health care for those who have it, or do we work to make sure that everyone in the state gets the care they need?

The human cost of this choice is enormous.

Instead of getting preventive care or treating problems when they are manageable, families are forced to wait until their loved ones are so sick that something must be done.

Doctors and nurses see many children in emergency rooms with serious illnesses that could have been contained if their parents had affordable insurance.

It's not unusual to see seniors who have stopped taking lifesaving medication because the cost is simply too high.

The effect of this approach takes a huge toll on our society.

Delivering primary health care in hospital emergency rooms is extremely expensive and inefficient. In a public health-care system that's already short of funding — in a state with a massive budget deficit — it is a shift of costs from private corporations to taxpayers we can't afford.

The supermarket chains involved in the strike are proposing to make the situation worse by pricing many of their current employees out of the health care coverage their families need. In addition, they are insisting that anyone hired from now on be forced to go without coverage because the employer would contribute so little that the employee couldn't afford to pay the remain-

ing cost.

If huge, standard-setting corporations like the supermarket chains can get away with this, our entire health-care system will suffer.

When the supermarket workers proclaim that "enough is enough," they are drawing a line not just for themselves but for all of us. They are saying that instead of a race to the bottom — taking away health care from those who have it — we need to provide affordable care to everyone.

From the front lines of health care, doctors and nurses are watching this conflict to see which prescription for our future will win out: more crowded emergency rooms and an erosion of community health or a new commitment to affordable health care for all.

Every Californian has a stake in the outcome.

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Our cause is your cause.

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