



July 21, 2022

The Honorable Anthony Portantino
Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
1021 O Street, Suite 7630
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: REQUEST Support for AB 2680 (Arambula) - Community Health Navigators

Dear Chair Portantino,

On behalf of The Children's Partnership, we strongly urge your support of AB 2680 (Arambula). This bill will invest in Community Health Navigators, who will work with Community Based Organizations, to provide services to Californians under Medi-Cal and the Medi-Cal Access Program (MCAP), to implement community-driven approaches to outreach, enrollment, retention and utilization of Californians who are eligible for Medi-Cal and the Medi-Cal Access Program. The bill advances health equity by ensuring low-income communities of color, immigrants, and other Limited English Proficient (LEP) and undocumented Californians are able to enroll in, retain and utilize their health care coverage.

The Children's Partnership (TCP) is a statewide children's advocacy organization that advances child health equity through public policy, community engagement, and research. We envision a California where all children, regardless of their race, ethnicity or place of birth, have the resources and opportunities they need to grow up healthy.

Medi-Cal is designed to provide comprehensive and early preventive care and treatments that identify risks and address them early in life. Over 5 million children in California are enrolled in Medi-Cal of which 72% are children of color from Latinx, Black, Native American or Asian American communities. Because Medi-Cal is the primary source of coverage for California's children of color,¹ Medi-Cal plays a critical role in addressing child health inequities and preventing them from manifesting in disease later as adults. In this manner, Navigators play an essential role in ensuring that children get timely access to care and have access to the resources and services they need to grow up healthy and succeed in life.

Navigators are needed now more than ever as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disproportionately harm children of color particularly Latinx children, who account for 64 percent of the children who tested positive for COVID-19 in the state.² According to a research conducted in 2020, during the pandemic, many parents sought for Medi-Cal after losing their jobs, but half of those parents were never able to enroll.³ The most common reasons mentioned by parents were excessive follow-up, including letters demanding extra information such as proof of identification or income.

¹ <https://first5center.org/publications/medi-cal-basics-for-early-childhood-leaders>

² <https://calmatters.org/health/coronavirus/2021/01/covid-new-syndrome-children/>

³ <https://imprintnews.org/child-welfare-2/californias-safety-net-failing-young-children-during-pandemic/52228>

Community health navigators are trusted local partners that help people overcome the multiple barriers to applying for affordable coverage through Medi-Cal and other health programs, including by providing culturally and linguistically competent assistance for immigrants and limited-English proficient community members. Navigators also help families complete post-enrollment tasks so they can stay in coverage. In addition, navigators help Medi-Cal families to access medical care, find doctors, keep track of, and get to medical, mental health and dental visits, obtain interpreters and translated materials, and connect with community supports to address insecurity in food, housing, personal safety, or immigration status and other social determinants of health.

The previous Navigators' pilot program recently expired on June 30, 2022. The expiration of this program will result in a critical gap in outreach services at a period when the Public Health Emergency (PHE) may be ending and a historic number of Medi-Cal beneficiaries will have to renew their coverage after years of continuous coverage during PHE. The potential loss of coverage during this period could result in a record number of disruptions in coverage, further exacerbating disparities in health care access and utilization among children of color. Childhood is the time when health-promoting behaviors and environments have the greatest influence on lifelong health and future well-being. When it comes to health, children of color face more challenges due to systemic issues like racism and poverty that manifest themselves in inequitable health outcomes such as low birth weight and high rates of hospitalization due to asthma.

The state needs to establish an entirely new program that will ensure Navigators can continue to provide life-saving services to enroll, retain, and encourage utilization of Medi-Cal benefits. AB 2680 will put California back on the right track to ensure children are connected to care by building on lessons learned from the current pilot project, to continue this critical and effective strategy for removing obstacles to health care for low-income children.⁴The bill also provides training and technical assistance to Medi-Cal Health Navigators on eligibility and enrollment rules and ensures stronger coordination between the Department of Healthcare Services and Covered California to ensure a more unified approach to CBO/navigator services.

For all these reasons, we respectfully request an "aye" vote on this measure.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Golden Testa', written in a cursive style.

Kristen Golden Testa
California Health Policy Director
The Children's Partnership

⁴ A new study by researchers at the University of Southern California (USC) for example, found low-income Latino adults in Los Angeles who received comprehensive community-based navigator services were three times more likely to report having a primary care clinic and over two and half times more likely to report having a primary care provider compared to the comparison group who received no services from Medi-Cal Health Navigators.