

## MY WORD

# Prop. 187 violates our beliefs about caring for children

By Sue Burrell

**C**ALIFORNIANS cherish the ideal of happy thriving children. We celebrate children as the hope for our future, and our politicians bolster their campaigns by supporting "children's issues." When children are at risk we are distressed. We cried when Polly Klaas was lost, and when we learned of her death, we vowed to strengthen our means for protecting children. Though our public systems are far from perfect, we work hard to assure that children in our state have a place to live, enough to eat, medical care, an education and protection from harm.

Nor are these sentiments confined to children on our own shores. Californians send money to cure blindness in Nepalese children, and to assure that Somalian children have something to eat. We read with horror the excerpts from 13-year-old Zlata's diary of war-torn Bosnia, and promise ourselves that what befell Holocaust children will never happen again.

Proposition 187 asks California voters to apply these deeply felt values only to children who can demonstrate that they are citizens, permanent residents or lawfully admitted temporary residents in this country. The enactment of this initiative will be disastrous to the well-being of many vulnerable children.

Every day, children in California are beaten, forced into sexual acts, starved and abandoned. Some are literally on the streets. But although abuse and neglect does not know national boundary lines, Prop. 187 prohibits the use of state social service funds to help undocumented children. If someone calls 911 to report a child being beaten, and legal immigration status cannot be demonstrated, Prop. 187 does not permit placement or the provision of social services through state-funded programs.

Under Prop. 187, undocumented children will be unable to get medical care except for emergencies. This will create enormous suffering for those who could have been effectively treated through routine, and preventive care. The costs to Californians will increase dramatically because many children will ultimately wind up in emergency rooms needing much more intrusive and expensive treatment.

Further, eliminating basic medical care to children will exponentially increase the public health dangers for all of us. For example, California already has 20 per-

cent of the active tuberculosis cases in the country, and the numbers continue to increase. Denying undocumented children access to routine immunizations and tests for disease will result in unnecessary death and illness for citizens and undocumented persons alike.

Much has been written already about Prop. 187's exclusion of undocumented children from public schools, flagrantly ignoring the Supreme Court's 1982 decision in Plyler vs. Doe that such exclusion is impermissible. Prohibiting undocumented children from going to school will severely punish them for something over which they have little control — their parents' immigration decisions. It will prevent children, many of whom will eventually attain legal status, from becoming full participants in our society. This will increase the very public burdens that proponents of the initiative decry.

Prop. 187 will also hurt many children who are citizens or legally admitted to this country. Because the initiative provides no guidelines for "reasonable suspicion" of illegal status, the weight of erroneous suspicions will fall most heavily on children whose skin color or accent makes them seem foreign.

**I**RONICALLY, too, the enactment of Prop. 187 will result in losses of federal funding that far outweigh any savings. Because the initiative eliminates services to many categories of immigrants who are entitled to services under federal law (for example, refugees or people granted political asylum), and fails to include federally mandated protections for timeliness, privacy of records and due process, California risks the loss of federal funds supporting state programs for those people.

The Legislative Analyst estimates that up to \$15 billion could be lost, far more than any savings to be reaped from excluding children from school, health care and social services. These cost estimates do not include the extraordinary amount of official energy and dollars that will be spent defending Prop. 187 against lawsuits challenging every aspect of its provisions.

Prop. 187 reflects the frustration of some Californians in hard economic times. But it violates our most basic beliefs about caring for children. Prop. 187 will not save our state; it will diminish us as a people.

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*Sue Burrell is a staff attorney at the Youth Law Center in San Francisco.*