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Forum: Kids at edge of fiscal cliff

BY BRUCE LESLEY and MICHELE COREY

---- — As the federal "fiscal cliff" approaches, we're hearing more about how various scenarios would affect politicians, defense contractors, high-income taxpayers, seniors, and other constituencies. But an important group of Michiganders with a lot on the line has been largely ignored: children.

The stakes are immense, because the recession has been hard on children. A recent analysis by the nonpartisan Urban Institute found that nearly 210,000 Michigan children live with an unemployed parent. Compared to 2007, that's nearly a 27 percent increase — and when you look at kids living with a long-term unemployed parent, the increase is 130 percent.

Michigan's need for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps) has increased more than 50 percent. And nearly one-fourth of Michigan children live in poverty.

Federal investments can — and do — protect children from the worst ... of a bad economy. Together, the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit lift nearly five million children out of poverty nationwide. Both bipartisan credits reward hard work. And both support local economies ... Likewise, federal unemployment benefits lift 600,000 children out of poverty.

But it's not just cash ... that makes a difference for kids. The child hunger rate would be much higher without SNAP, which provides food for more than 20 million children. SNAP also lifts 1.7 million children out of poverty. And the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid are critical lifelines ... accounting for half of the Americans who get the health care they need through Medicaid. ...

The American people get it. An Election Day poll found overwhelming bipartisan support for investments that protect kids. ...

Yet Congress has placed each of these investments — and many more that protect kids from economic harm — on the chopping block. If Congress fails to avert the fiscal cliff, important anti-poverty improvements to unemployment benefits, the Child Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit will automatically be repealed.

Doing nothing also triggers automatic cuts to education, nutrition for pregnant women and babies, and other important investments.

But some of the "solutions" on the table would do as much or more harm than doing nothing.

For example, the budget plan passed by the U.S. House would actually restrict kids' access to the Child Tax Credit, raising taxes on working poor families.

That same plan would also make deep cuts to SNAP (and) would put the health care of 30 million children at

risk by ... undermining Medicaid and ending CHIP.

We all need the next generation ... to succeed. Putting that success at risk ... will cost our state and nation more in the long term. ...

About the authors: Bruce Lesley is president of First Focus Campaign for Children; Michele Corey is interim president and CEO Michigan's Children.

About the forum: The forum is a periodic column of opinion written by Record-Eagle readers in their areas of interest or expertise. Submissions of 500 words or less may be made by e-mailing letters@record-eagle.com. Please include biographical information and a photo.