The children of Alabama are in danger.

There is a very real, potentially devastating threat to over 40 percent of Alabama’s children – those who receive their healthcare through government-funded programs. With Governor Bentley’s announced proration for the remainder of Fiscal Year 2012 and with the massive cuts proposed in the budget for 2013, there is a high likelihood that most of these children will be left without access to medical care.

You may be saying, “Why does that matter to me? My kids have insurance.” Or you may be thinking, “I don’t have kids at home anymore.” Access to healthcare for these children, the most vulnerable in our society, affects all of us.

When children do not have ready access to a healthcare, they are more likely to attend school and daycare sick, spreading diseases like colds, flu, strep throat, and stomach viruses to others. They are more likely to have undiagnosed or untreated mental illness, causing disruptions in the classroom that affect the teachers’ ability to teach and other students’ ability to learn. They are more likely to have school absences, more likely to be retained in a grade, and more likely to become teen parents.

When children do not have ready access to healthcare, their parents are more likely to miss work. If you are an employer and your employee’s child cannot get in to see an ear specialist for three months, you will likely have disruption in their job performance and increased absenteeism during that time. Parents of chronically ill children are more likely to be depressed, a condition that can be compounded by the stress of not being able to get care. These parents and children are more likely to seek care in an emergency room, crowding an already strained system. Will you be able to be seen when you need it, or will the ER be full?

Perhaps most importantly, because such a large number of children currently receive healthcare through government programs, pediatric subspecialists are largely supported by these dollars. With decreased funding for these programs, these specialists may not be available for your children when they become critically ill. Much of the funding for the Critical Care Transport team at Children’s of Alabama comes through state/federal government programs. Without these programs, that medical jet may not be readily available for your child, regardless of insurance.

As a pediatrician who has taken care of children for 15 years – from the poorest of the poor to the richest of the rich – I am sincerely worried about the future of children’s healthcare in Alabama. Please voice your concerns to the Governor, Representatives, and Senators and implore them to protect Alabama-funded health insurance programs. The children cannot speak for themselves.

Won’t you speak up for them?