



Governor's proposal to redirect outpatient mental health care funds to alleviate budget crisis blasted

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Jan 27, 2009

The state organization that lobbies for California's 58 county mental health department directors is urging lawmakers to reject a proposal they say would drastically reduce services that keep mentally ill people out of hospitals and jails.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger wants to redirect about \$227 million collected from Prop. 63, a 2004 measure to expand outpatient mental health services, and put it toward existing state mental health care programs. The redirection would alleviate shortfalls created by the state's estimated \$42 billion budget deficit, he has said.

Patricia Ryan, executive director of the California Mental Health Director Association, said Tuesday that Schwarzenegger's plan violates state law and would end up costing taxpayers more for hospitalizations and law enforcement.

By law, Prop. 63 money can't fund existing programs or involuntary institutionalized mental health care. It pays for counseling, job training and housing to help mentally ill people care for themselves.

"That is the entire intent of the act," Ryan said. "The governor's proposal would put us back to where we were if not worse."

Schwarzenegger spokeswoman Lisa Page said the state's budget deficit has required the governor to make some tough choices.

"The governor has put out seven budgets this year, and as we move along, as we have said all year, the problem gets worse and the options for solving the problem get worse every time," she said. "He understands how difficult this is, but with a \$42 billion deficit, there simply are no good options."

Voters would have to approve changes to the act.

Prop. 63, better known as the millionaire's tax, collects an additional 1 percent of income from those who earn more than \$1 million to fund new mental health services. The California Department of Mental Health collected nearly \$700 million from the tax during the 2006-07 budget year.

The act requires counties to get mental health services to underserved populations.

Ryan said she fears the governor's proposal could turn into a permanent program change, depending on how referendum language would be written. If approved, the proposal would exacerbate state and local cash crunches and probably force clients out of treatment and onto the streets, she said.

"It would leave a permanent hole in county mental health services," Ryan said. "It's not clear to us whether the county would be obligated to make up the shortfall."

Murrieta resident Melissa Rini said counseling and other program services she has gotten in the past year have helped her thrive and become more productive. Rini, 23, said she rarely left her room because she is bipolar and suffers from panic and anxiety disorders.

She is one of an estimated 16,000 Riverside County residents who have received help through Prop. 63-funded programs. The county got nearly \$34 million to fund them, said Maria Mabey, assistant director of the county mental health department.

"We are definitely worried about the governor's proposal," she said. "It would be catastrophic for our clients and the county. This was a huge boost for us when it got approved by the voters."

The department already is facing reductions because the county's property tax revenues have flattened and are expected to decline this year. Recovery could take several years.

County Executive Officer Bill Luna has asked department heads to slash budgets by 25 percent over the next four years. He capped staffing in all departments late last year.

Mabey said the county could not pick up any program costs left unfunded by changes to Prop. 63.

Allan Rawland, director of the San Bernardino County Department of Behavioral Health, said his county is expected to get \$47 million in Prop. 63 money, which helps more than 16,000 people. He said he's unsure how the governor's proposal would affect his county's programs.

"What is does is set a precedent," Rawland said. "It represents an ongoing reduction."