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GREENLIGHT



County budget props up jail, cuts social services

BY JEFF VONKAENEL / jeffv@newsreview.com

Last week, five local elected officials decided how to spend the \$4.4 billion Sacramento County budget for 2019-20. As always, the five county supervisors' choices were controversial. There were winners and losers.

The major losers in this budget were the county's social services, where 189 full-time positions were eliminated, mostly in the departments of human assistance and child, family and adult services. In addition, CalFresh outreach and animal services were slashed.

Much of this year's budget pressure was created by the need to improve health care at the county jail and a lawsuit that is forcing the county to fix it. This budget is a severe blow to the county's already strained safety net. And there is a strange logic to the county's budget solution.

Because the county has been unable to find employees at the current pay and workload, it has 189 social service positions unfilled. Instead of increasing pay or improving working conditions, the county decided to eliminate those positions to save money.

But if it was unable to recruit people before, this situation will only get worse as people retire or quit because their caseload is too high. This "solution" is setting us up for a future disaster where each year we have fewer workers but no less work. And these impacted positions, in areas such as child protective services, perform critical functions to protect children and families.

At the same time, the county chose to increase the budgets of the Sheriff's Department and District Attorney's Office. The District Attorney's budget went from \$93 million to \$95 million and the sheriff's already-huge budget increased from \$502 million to \$542 million.

And why are these budgets being increased, while we cut social services? Because we continue to treat mental health issues and drug use as criminal problems instead of health problems.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, more than 60% of all people in local jails have a recent history of mental health issues or are currently exhibiting symptoms. Sacramento law enforcement officials told me that locally the number is at least 30%. More than half of all people in jail depend on or abuse alcohol or drugs. Are they getting adequate treatment in jail? No. Does being in jail make their situation worse? Yes.

Yet we continue to lock up people whose mental health problems may have caused them to break a law. We put them in a facility that everyone knows makes them worse. We release them back onto the streets. And then we cut back the very social service programs that could help them, because we have spent so much of our budget on jails.

The U.S. incarcerates people at more than five times the rate of other industrialized countries. But using the criminal justice system to deal with people suffering from mental health issues or drug addiction does not work. Not only is it a waste of money, it makes the situation worse.

Unfortunately, our current sheriff and district attorney do not understand that we need to fundamentally reform our criminal justice system. And so our supervisors have approved a budget that prioritizes locking people up, rather than providing supportive services.

There will be another budget next year. Hopefully it will be smarter and more effective. □

Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.