

## **Retain services that keep elders and disabled in their homes**

Donna Calame

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger made it crystal clear: The budget needs to be balanced, and cutting crucial services to the 400,000 Californians most in need of public support is one way he thinks it should be done.

Schwarzenegger has repeatedly singled out a 50-year-old home care program for low-income residents as a candidate for the chopping block. But before he redlines California's In-Home Supportive Services, the governor needs to think twice. Decimating assistance to those least able to fend for themselves is not only unconscionable, it's unwise. Any money saved in the short term will end up costing the state many times over in the long run.

The program provides assistance with daily tasks and intimate personal care for impoverished elders and people with disabilities who cannot maintain their independence without help. Its workers cook meals, do grocery shopping, help people get dressed or use the bathroom. They empty urinals, clean house and do laundry. In short, they provide all the services necessary to allow users of these services - many who have no one else to rely on - to remain in their own homes or with family.

Schwarzenegger cited in-home supportive services as an example of a fast-growing program that should be seriously considered for cuts as the state attempts to shore up a \$42 billion shortfall. But the reason this program is growing is because need for it is growing.

And the question is, who is going to look out for these people until the state gets back in the black?

What will happen to the terminally ill veteran - disabled while serving his country - when he's deprived of help that now allows him to live out his last few days in his own place? What about the elderly wife, in poor health herself, who is caring for her 80-year-old paralyzed husband? Or the mother keeping at home her 30-year-old son in a wheelchair who does not speak, has limited comprehension and is like a baby. And who suffers from daily epileptic convulsions and needs 24-hour care?

Healthy people with adequate insurance and family or friends they can count on may find it difficult to comprehend what it's like to be so dependent on others for intimate assistance. Someone who can check in regularly and attend to basic human needs can allow people to

live independently and with dignity, staving off institutionalization - or worse, abandonment.

They can also help keep small problems from turning into big ones. Without these services, one-time clients will have no choice but to turn to already overflowing emergency rooms or county hospitals when their health and well-being is jeopardized - further straining state and federal health and long-term care resources.

The governor has tried before to slash in-home supportive services, but state legislators who understood the devastating consequences of these cuts rejected his proposals. It's time for them - and for the rest of us - to step up to the plate again and tell the governor to keep his hands off funding for our low-income elders and people with disabilities.

The governor's spokesperson, in explaining his proposals after a rally at his San Francisco office earlier this month, noted that these budget decisions have been very difficult, but that the governor's responsibility right now is to lead. We do need leadership - but we need compassionate and fair leadership. We need to choose what kind of society we want to live in and support. I hope our conclusion will be to recognize that services like in-home supportive services and other social safety net programs are just as crucial to the stability of our families, neighborhoods, cities, state and nation as police and fire departments.

The governor and the Legislature have hard choices to make in their quest to balance the budget. But balancing it at the expense of residents whose lives may literally depend on assistance from their community is not the answer - not now, not ever.

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