

December, 2008
News Alert Number 9

Republican Legislature Seeks to Drain MHSA Funds into Bottomless Hole of State Hospitals and Prisons

Dear CNMHC Member:

Yesterday's Republican Special Session Budget Plan in the State Senate proposed to reallocate \$3.9 million in Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) funds that are committed for distribution to counties for community mental health services and supports after county plans are approved. The proposed raid is part of a larger plan to address \$22 billion in the state's estimated \$40 billion budget gap. Instead of community mental health services – where these funds are sorely needed and the voters have mandated the funds be spent – the plan would redirect these funds into the state hospital forensic units and prisons – holdouts from the broken, outdated “fail-first” system that have drained state coffers and failed clients/survivors for decades.

Newly elected Republicans are being guided by a few carryovers who are continuing the ongoing battle with the Governor and Democrats on the severe budgetary issues confronting the State. The State Legislative Analyst has been quoted “that we will be unable to pay our bills as soon as February next year.”

Many of the Republican legislators' proposals aren't new to the discussion, having come from the Governor, the Democrats, or the Legislative Analyst's office. In the mix are some viable ideas that could provide substantial assistance in sorting out the budget dilemma along with some not-so-good ideas.

One new wrinkle was discussed yesterday, which directly impacts mental health, an erroneous assumption that \$3.9 billion in MHSA funding is unallocated, just waiting to be used by whoever needs it most. This is incorrect because the funds are encumbered, or assigned to counties, which are developing and implementing recovery-oriented MHSA programs. Their proposal was to move this funding to cover a deficit in the State hospitals and State prisons.

Nothing could be more categorically wrong than to thwart the will of the voters who made this a law in 2004. This is “apples and elephants.” Forget the oranges. This is misuse of funds dedicated to providing housing, employment, community services, and community integration for people who have had more than enough experience in involuntary settings.

An additional caveat proposed by the Republicans was to propose legislation that would put them in charge of allocating use of future funds. It is concerning when we see that the legislature is not able to make either timely or effective decisions due to the way in which legislative votes are counted (2/3 majority with Dems seeking to make that a simple majority) and the resistance along party lines to give on the issue of raising taxes.

Back to the newly elected. They neither know enough about the MHSA nor would be willing to cross the party line, so the stalemate persists. Fortunately, the newly elected President Pro Tempore of the Senate is none other than Darrell Steinberg, author of Proposition 63, which became the Mental Health Services Act.

Even though we have a very high-powered friend at court, the outcome will be hard hitting on vulnerable persons with disabilities who have SSI/SSP, Medi-Cal, CAPI (food program for new citizens), and IHSS. The Democrats are staying focused on cuts as well as working on revenue solutions. They are promoting tax increases.

The reality of the situation here in Sacramento is that the current budget deficit is \$15.2 billion with a projected increase in that amount to \$40 billion by the middle of 2010 which is reflective of the state of the nation and even further afield. So goes the US, so goes the world market.

Your voice is needed to help guide the legislators in making the most humane decisions in a time of difficult decisions. You can find out who your senator is by going to www.sen.gov, and who your assemblyperson is by going to www.asm.gov. Please tell them your stories of success with the MHSA, how it has assisted you in your recovery. Don't let them take that away from you and your peers. Let them know how much you value their work on this dilemma, and how much you are relying on their making the most equitable decisions both in the short-term and the long-term.

Just so you know, over 200,000 persons have been served directly by the MHSA statewide, and that doesn't include those of you who have become employed in mental health locally. They need to know what you are doing on the job to help others with their recovery. Give them anonymous situations where someone has made incredible strides. This happened with AB 2034 and it is happening with the MHSA too.

We will be sending out a sample letter, which can be tailored to individuals or groups with your personal input. For further information on the proposals, go to <http://cssrc.us/news>. Please spread the word that this is the time for action.

Respectfully submitted,

Gwen Lewis-reid
Interim Executive Director

California Network of Mental Health Clients

References:

Article, John Howard and Anthony York, Capitol Weekly, 12/12/08

Email, Rusty Selix, Executive Director, MHAC, 12/15/08

Memo, Patricia Ryan, Executive Director, California Mental Health Directors Association, 12/15/08

Press Release, *ibid.*, 12/15/08

Press Release, California Legislature, Senate Republican Leader Dave Cogdill, Assembly Republican Leader Mike Villines, 12/15//08

Email, Maria Ostheimer, MSW, 12/16/08