

Budget Cuts Linger Effect on Vulnerable Populations

OpEd

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Monday, June 16, 2008

The San Francisco Human Services Network and Coleman Advocates for Children, Youth and Families along with other advocacy and policy groups held a Town Hall Meeting Monday June 9, 2008. As I sat listening to one Executive Director after another detailing the devastating impact of the proposed budget cuts on children, youth, families, homeless individuals and people suffering from severe mental health and substance abuse issues, I wondered: *what is going to happen here?* Many social service organizations are poised to significantly reduce services or in some cases close their doors entirely if the proposed budget cuts go through.

Mayor Newsom's proposed cuts will have a particularly devastating and prolonged effect on one of San Francisco's most vulnerable populations: the homeless and those who are at-risk of homelessness. Organizations that serve these populations have spent years designing systems that meet the very specific needs of homeless children, youth and families. In the face of the proposed cuts, these systems could be lost, possibly forever, and there will be no turning back. Homeless youth and adults will lose access to vital housing, medical, social, nutritional, educational, employability and support programs currently offered by nonprofit health and human services organizations citywide. We will end up meeting them at end of road instead of at the beginning of the road. This is not an efficient use of dollars.

The cuts we are facing at Larkin Street Youth Services are, on a relative scale, minimal compared to those of some of our fellow community organizations. However, we must all be very clear about the fact that our services which may be cut will severely and negatively impact our most vulnerable and highest risk kids.

It's important to note, also, that the budget cuts will have a grim, unavoidable domino effect. Larkin Street has been successful in large part because of the strength of our partnerships with our fellow community organizations. So, with the cuts, how many more youth will be displaced and arrive at Larkin Street Youth Services because vital services to children, youth and families are going to be eliminated? And when they arrive at our doors, we will then be funded to serve them?

To every cut, there will be a high human cost. This flies in the face of San Francisco's values. We are the City that takes care of its community. We led the fight to legalize gay marriage. We are proud of the fact that we offer sanctuary to undocumented immigrants. And until now, we have been able to at least meet the basic needs of our most vulnerable residents – the homeless. Now we may be threatened with an influx of individuals being treated in emergency rooms, dealing with incarceration or institutionalization, and living on the streets with nowhere to go. Again I must ask: *what is going to happen here?*

Balancing the city's budget on the backs of nonprofits without regard to the massive impact these cuts will have is most certainly not in our best interest. Entire populations will be left without any alternatives, and it will take years to build our agencies back up to a level that is adequate enough to meet the rising demand.

Therefore I look to every member of the San Francisco community to take a stand. Take action by writing or e-mailing your City Supervisor and Mayor Newsom. Attend the upcoming budget hearings: the Beilenson Hearing on June 17, 3:00pm at City Hall, and the Budget & Finance Committee Hearing on June 19, 5pm, City Hall. Write an Op Ed to any and all of our local publications. We must speak out against these cuts. It is vital that nonprofit health and human services organizations in San Francisco be allowed to continue offering their effective programs without the threat of budget cuts. The consequences otherwise are too dire.