

Is Prop. 63 missing mental health goals?

Drew Joseph

Published 9:28 p.m., Sunday, December 2, 2012

Proposition 63, which voters approved in 2004, was touted as a way to address serious mental illnesses in California, but in the years since, critics - including some of the original supporters - have argued that it has gone off the rails in its implementation.

They have questioned how the \$7 billion the measure has generated - from a 1 percent tax on income above \$1 million - has been spent, accusing state and county officials of squandering millions on public relations campaigns, consultants and programs loosely tied to mental illness.

Funds generated by Prop. 63, also known as the Mental Health Services Act, are meant to expand services for the mentally ill, develop new programs and stop mental illness from becoming disabling.

The Associated Press reported in July that money was being spent on yoga classes for some San Francisco Department of Public Health workers who had sought mental health treatment or whose family members had. Other revenue has supported gardening programs in Fresno County and a sweat lodge program for American Indians in Napa County, the AP found.

"The basic issue is: Is the money going to people with serious mental illness?" said DJ Jaffe, the executive director of Mental Illness Policy Org. "And it's not."

Program defended

Advocates for the programs say the criticisms are overblown.

"When you're spending a billion dollars-plus a year, I'm sure there are going to be individual programs that you can criticize, but the proverbial forest is being lost for the trees," said state Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, who helped write the ballot measure.

"I felt and still feel like the critics were having a bit of a field day, pointing at this and that and not addressing the whole of the investment," said the Sacramento Democrat.

Steinberg and other state senators requested a state audit to find out how the revenue from Prop. 63 has been spent. He said it would show that the measure has served as a lifeline for mental health care at a time when the state's other mental health funding has been slashed. The results of the audit are expected to be released in May.

Much of the criticism has focused on how money was used on mental illness prevention and early intervention programs, which account for 20 percent of Prop. 63 spending. The money, critics say, should have gone solely to programs "designed to prevent mental illnesses from becoming severe and disabling," as the law says.

Funding questioned

While millions have gone to helping people with serious mental illnesses, other funding has gone to education campaigns and wellness programs for people not diagnosed with mental illness. Critics say the programs were not what voters were promised when they approved Prop. 63.

"It's a complete distortion of the law," said Rose King, who helped write the measure and is now a vocal critic.

Supporters defend many of the programs the critics deride, saying they are efforts to reduce stigma and to connect with minority communities that have not traditionally sought treatment for mental illnesses. They said Prop. 63 has expanded care for people other than those with serious illnesses or who are in crisis.

"It's been transformational, absolutely transformational, for our system," said Patricia Ryan, the executive director of the California Mental Health Directors Association.

One program supporters tout as evidence the measure is helping is Prevention and Recovery in Early Psychosis. It provides treatment for schizophrenics within the first five years of their diagnosis and for people who are at high risk for developing schizophrenia, with the goal of slowing the disease and helping patients manage their conditions.

The program started in 2006 and relied in part on grants until it started receiving Prop. 63 funds in 2008. It is up and running in San Francisco, Alameda and San Mateo counties and, with the help of federal funding, is expanding to San Joaquin and Monterey counties.

"If we didn't get Prop. 63 funding, it would've been gone," said Bob Bennett, CEO of the Family Service Agency of San Francisco, which, along with UCSF and other community organizations, coordinates the program.

Jessica Cruz, the executive director of the California branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, said she thinks the measure has improved mental health care statewide. Mental health advocates, she said, should be working together to maximize their limited pool of resources instead of sparring at a time when the state has cut mental health funding.

"We can't be crying over the crumbs and fighting each other," she said.

Drew Joseph is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: djoseph@sfgate.com Twitter: [@drewjoseph](https://twitter.com/drewjoseph)

Ads by Yahoo!

© 2012 Hearst Communications Inc.

HEARST newspapers