

Mentally ill miss out on Prop. 63 funds

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California voters passed the Mental Health Services Act in 2004 because they know how mental illness debilitates their families, destroys their friends and harms their communities. It is thus disturbing that the state agency overseeing Prop. 63 spending is ignoring the requirements of the law - to spend the funds it raises on services to individuals with serious mental illness.

Prop. 63 levied a 1 percent surtax on million-dollar incomes to fund health services for mentally ill adults and children - about 5 percent of the general population.

Since 2004, some \$7 billion in Prop. 63 funds have gone to the counties. The tax is on track to generate another \$1.4 billion this year. Of that, 20 percent is earmarked for Prevention and Early Intervention programs.

Prevention programs do work to help individuals with mental illness get help earlier and avoid ending up homeless or hospitalized. But, as the state has rolled out the regulations to enact Prop. 63, these programs slowly have morphed from those designed to prevent mental illness from becoming severe and disabling, to programs designed to prevent serious mental illness - something beyond the scope of science.

So, funds have gone to programs for people with no history of mental illness to promote mental wellness - a happy state, for sure, but not the voters' intent.

Other monies are spent on campaigns to reduce stigma and prevent discrimination. For example, part of a \$3 million grant to the Entertainment Industries Council went to develop a style guide for journalists reporting on mental health issues.

Voters did not approve this special fund for a public-relations campaign to sensitize journalists. These dollars should be going to treatment.

Rusty Selix, a mental health executive who serves as a Prop. 63 oversight commissioner, said focus groups convened to help draft the law said stigma is why people don't seek mental health care.

"People said it was important thing to tackle," he added.

So is getting care to those already diagnosed with serious mental illness.

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