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IF YOU CAN'T KILL NEEDY, SLASH THEIR FUNDING

Human resources summit addresses increasing problems

If only we could legally kill the disabled, the elderly and the mentally ill, billions of dollars could be saved.

Instead, we slowly strangle the programs that help them, knowing the cause of death will eventually be ruled “natural causes” by the medical examiner.

On Thursday, I attended a first-ever human resources summit organized by South-Southwest Suburban United Way and CEDA (Community and Economic Development Association of Cook County).

Attending were representatives from about 50 organizations in the Southland that help the elderly, the disabled, the mentally ill, the homeless and people dealing with alcohol and drug abuse problems.

The main theme seemed to be this: Illinois has cut funding to many of these programs, and state payments for services are 30, 60 or 90 days late.

More than \$80 million is owed to 259 agencies surveyed by Metro Chicago United Way during the last fiscal year, which ended June 30.

Sixty percent of the groups surveyed said they will be forced to reduce or freeze the number of people they serve. More than 10 percent of the agencies anticipate that they will be forced to temporarily or permanently close locations because of less state funding.

And the problem is only going to get worse.

With the state facing a roughly \$12 billion deficit, Gov. Pat Quinn has decided to launch a pilot managed care program in the suburban areas of Chicago, a sort of HMO, to cut the cost of human services.

“Things are bad today (for human services agencies), but things are likely to get far worse in the coming year,” said Dan Strick, president of South-Star Services, a program that helps the developmentally disabled and the elderly. “I think we will look up soon and see far fewer providers and far fewer services for those in need.

“Even if there is a tax hike next year, we probably won’t see that money for 18 months, and even then it’s likely that there won’t be a whole lot of new money for these programs.”

As for the state’s managed care program, Strick said, “The state is looking for the biggest bang for its dollar.”

He echoed a sentiment expressed by many service providers at the summit who worry that the state would end up funding the cheapest programs instead of the best.

I suppose you could call these folks greedy and claim they’re worried more about self-preservation than balancing budgets. But these are the people President George H. W. Bush once called the “thousand points of light.”

We’re talking about Catholic Charities, Aunt Martha’s, the South Suburban Council on Alcoholism and South Suburban PADS, among others. These are not-for-profits, not government programs.

These are the people the government has been relying on more and more to take care of our neediest citizens as it shuts down mental health clinics and homes for the developmentally disabled.

Now politicians are saying they spend too much money, so Illinois is going to hire a private agency that will decide what service gets state funding and what service does not and no one knows what criteria will be used.

But you can be sure that paying top dollar for top-notch care will not be a priority. The goal is to cut costs, not improve service.

James Washington III, chief professional officer for the South-Southwest

Suburban United Way, told me his goal is to bring together all the agencies that his organization funds to develop a sort of holistic approach. He wants to address social and health problems before they reach a crisis stage that requires more expensive interventions.

That’s a laudable goal. But have you ever tried to tell a person with a drinking problem that he has a problem before he has lost his job, his marriage and his health? Ever try to tell a child not to drink and use drugs?

If that was really effective, there wouldn’t be any problems.

Perhaps more to the point, United Way wants to organize its members into a more effective lobbying organization in Springfield so they’re not competing with each other for funds.

But as not-for-profits, they can’t make campaign contributions and, while they will campaign for more revenue, they will not endorse any particular tax increase plan.

State Rep. Will Davis (D-Hornwood) attended the summit and said that sort of support is no support at all. He wants someone who will stand beside him at a news conference and say they will support a particular piece of legislation.

And no one mentioned the name of House Speaker Michael Madigan (D-Chicago), who stopped a tax hike this spring. Like the character Voldemort in the Harry Potter books, he is the one whose name cannot be mentioned.

My guess is that there probably is some waste in human services programs. Things probably could be done more efficiently.

But I have no confidence at all that the state is going to accomplish that.

However, the state budget must be cut. And the elderly, the developmentally disabled and mentally ill are slow-moving targets.

You can’t kill them. But you can starve their programs to death.



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