

State Legislature should have a special session on poverty, too

The dust has settled on the passage of the state budget, and the results are tragic for millions of Californians.

In contrast to the Legislature's budget bill, passed only the day before the deal was reached, the final budget retreated from commitments to those struggling against deep poverty. It included some accomplishments, such as the new earned income tax credit, but that will not reach most of those in deep poverty.

The final budget stripped out provisions that would have relieved the most impoverished Californians, including a repeal of the racist maximum family grant rule in CalWORKs and the first cost-of-living adjustments in 10 years for CalWORKs and the state-funded portion of Supplemental Security Income.

This raises a number of vital questions:

- Isn't this just being fiscally prudent? If there was no harm to Californians, yes, but the reality is that people are suffering. Many more than usual testified at committee hearings and during visits to the Capitol this year to explain their harrowing situations.

Programs were better funded before the Great Recession, but our state budget was balanced by cutting them. For example, in 2009 the budget repealed the CalWORKs and SSI cost-of-living increases signed into law by Gov. Ronald Reagan in the early 1970s. The Legislature's budget would have made modest progress on reversing such damage, but several items were removed during negotiations with Gov. Jerry Brown.

- Was this austerity

necessary? The governor said his more austere budget was based on the estimates of his fiscal analysts. However, the independent Legislative Analyst's Office and the California Budget and Policy Center have shown that the Department of Finance has consistently underestimated revenues by at least \$2 billion a year since Brown has become governor.

Furthermore, the budget center argues that the current interpretation of Proposition 98's funding formula, which funnels almost all additional revenues into education at the expense of much-needed human service programs (including ones essential to the poorest schoolchildren), is a choice of the Legislature and not mandated by Proposition 98.

- The state budget includes some anti-poverty

measures, so what's going on? The budget largely favors those who are able to work at the expense of those who cannot, including children. Because of circumstances that could happen to any of us, many Californians have little to no ability to work and often face serious obstacles and constant discrimination when they try.

About three-fourths of CalWORKs recipients don't have a car, a basic necessity to find and keep most jobs that pay a living wage. They're certainly not going to be able to get one while on CalWORKs; the average family of three receives about \$509 a month – equal to 30 percent of the federal poverty level. No wonder that, as Los Angeles County officials have testified before legislators several times, homelessness is a major problem for families receiving CalWORKs.

Millions of people are being left behind by California's recovering economy. They are not in a position to benefit from

the improving job market. Also, rising home values mean impossible rents, which is a major reason that, when cost of living is included, California has the highest poverty rate in the nation.

- Can anything be done? Our elected officials still have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership. The governor has called special sessions to deal with transportation and Medi-Cal, and legislators return to the Capitol today.

There should be a special session to tackle deep poverty as well. That would not only bring attention to how serious the situation is, it would create an opportunity to develop solutions outside the rigid timelines of the normal legislative process.

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