

Senate's Budget Proposals = One Confusing Equation by Bob Sharpe

It doesn't take a mathematician to see that recent health and human services budget proposals in the Florida Senate don't add up.

Take for example the Senate's proposal to cut \$137 million from Florida's community mental health programs. This drastic funding cut would eliminate many of the programs that serve the severely mentally ill and offer residential treatment, medications, outpatient treatment and other supports for individuals with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression and other serious mental illnesses.

The Senate's confusing budget proposals also include \$27.7 million in cuts to substance abuse programs in Florida, a measure that comes at a time when legislators also hope to reduce prison and hospital admissions and costs statewide.

A closer look at the numbers suggests these policy goals contradict, rather than complement, one another. The economic impact of alcohol and drug abuse in Florida is \$43.7 billion annually. Many of these costs are associated with expensive emergency room visits and lengthy incarcerations that could be avoided by offering prevention and treatment services.

In Orange County alone, a robust mental health diversion program has already saved local law enforcement \$2.2 million over the past seven years just by reducing or eliminating time spent in emergency rooms. Statewide, the average state hospital bill from lack of treatment is \$112,000 compared to the \$1,551 annual cost of a mental health treatment program.

Florida could take advantage of similar savings by investing in programs, rather than prisons, to address substance abuse. Compared to the \$55,000 it costs Florida taxpayers every year to incarcerate a drug offender, it costs only \$2,400 annually to treat him or her.

Instead of investing in programs that put individuals on the path to recovery, the Senate's proposals opt to channel more taxpayer money into our ballooning prison, healthcare, child welfare and juvenile justice systems – all of which promise high recidivism rates and little return on investment.

While trying to attract new industries and create jobs, Florida's quality of life and public safety measures will decline. Neighborhoods will be less desirable places to live. Unemployment rates will increase, and workforce readiness will decline.

Will industries want to relocate to Florida? When Florida's citizens with mental illness are placed on the streets, incarcerated or unnecessarily admitted to emergency rooms, who will be left to foot the bill?

The Senate's proposed cuts to mental health and substance abuse programs that lighten the burden on prisons and hospitals don't add up to savings for Florida's taxpayers. Instead, they will create more problems than solutions, leave thousands of citizens without vital services and create dangers for Florida's communities.

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