

Keep kids', families' needs first when deciding on cuts

by Dana Bunnett, Executive Director Kids in Common

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After sitting through hours and hours of budget hearings last month, it is clear to me that the Santa Clara County Supervisors are not having fun. Our five elected county officials are facing a devastating budget deficit and have to figure out where to make cuts to programs that they value and that they know help members of our community. They are considering a budget that makes sweeping cuts to public health, mental health, substance and alcohol abuse services and other safety net programs. It has to be tough, as these are a group of leaders who clearly have as a core value, the importance of supporting children and families. They have demonstrated this value by investing in innovative programs and services that help families and improve outcomes for children.

At Kids in Common, Santa Clara County's child advocacy organization, we believe every cut should be evaluated for its impact on children and families. The data suggests we need to be investing more in children, not less:

- Nearly 15,000 children suffer from chronic hunger. Yet food subsidy programs such as WIC are utilized by only 65% of the families eligible for them.
- 33% of 11th graders report that they have used alcohol or other drugs in the past 30 days.
- Barriers to routine use of healthcare mean 37% of Latino children do not get their immunizations on time.
- 7.1 out of 1,000 children in Santa Clara County have a substantiated case of child abuse annually and more than 2,100 children live in foster care.
- By conservative estimates, a staggering 17% of our students, and 32% of Hispanic students do not graduate from high school.

It is unacceptable that so many children are faring so poorly in a county as resource rich as Santa Clara County. The cuts being discussed are ones that will leave many of our children and families isolated and without key supports. These are not cuts to preventive services – the services we are talking about cutting actually **intervene** with families who are under severe stress, who have children at risk of ending up in the emergency room, foster care or juvenile hall.

While the County may need to cut some **programs**, we believe that everything should be done to maintain as many of these intervention **services** to children and families as possible. Sometimes this may mean identifying innovative, lower cost ways to deliver the service such as recruiting interns. In other cases, it may mean funding community based organizations to deliver the programs at a lower cost. And in some cases it means saying no to the cuts.

To say no to some of the cuts means we will probably have to decrease the County's 4% contingency reserve. Supervisors Yeager and Kniss have already floated this idea and there seems to be some interest in this from the other supervisors, including Supervisor McHugh who was the original driving force behind increasing the reserve.

Opponents to decreasing the reserve have expressed concern about Santa Clara County having a devastating Hurricane Katrina-type event. I would argue that Katrina was so catastrophic because children and families were so poorly supported and so disconnected from their community **before** it hit. People in New Orleans had no resources to deal the catastrophe and did not know where to turn. When families live in a community where they feel connected

and know how to get help, they will fare much better in the aftermath of a 7.0 earthquake or a flu pandemic. It is when families are isolated and on their own that we see the magnitude of the disaster increase.

Opponents of dipping into the reserve also argue that the deficit is one that will be coming back for years to come that we have to cut now or we will just have to cut next year. But next year, we have the opportunity to pass a county-wide health and human services sales tax. There may also be changes at the state and federal level that will lead to more revenue coming to this county. The future can bring better financial times for the County. But for many of these programs, if we cut them now, it will be nearly impossible to bring them back later.

The decisions facing the Board of Supervisors are tough and I don't envy them. I know they cannot save everything. But as they consider the cuts they have to make, I hope they will consider the impact on children first. The research continues to show that focusing on children's needs will help them become community members who are healthy, ready for higher education, work and citizenship. As a community, we need to let our supervisors know we care about how budget cuts may impact children and tell them that their past investment in children and families has not been misplaced. As James Baldwin so eloquently said, "For these are all our children. We will all profit by or pay for whatever they become."

Dana Bunnett is Executive Director of Kids in Common, Santa Clara County's voice for children and the agency driving the Santa Clara County Children's Agenda. For more information on Kids in Common please go to www.kidsincommon.org.