

Politics, short-sighted moves marked governor's actions on social services

By Frank Mecca | 11/18/10

As Gov. Schwarzenegger prepares to leave office in just over a month, the legacy he leaves behind in the area of social services can be summed up as follows: It didn't have to be this way.

During his tenure, Schwarzenegger routinely made short-sighted decisions that not only hurt Californians struggling to make ends meet, but also stunted the state's economic recovery, while doing nothing to solve our chronic budget deficit. He politicized programs, including CalWORKs, Child Welfare Services and In-Home Supportive Services, with long histories of bipartisan support, and fueled public misperception about programs that serve California's most vulnerable families.

Poor families and individuals become an easy target during lean budget years, when the state's economy is down and unemployment is high. Instead of standing up for working families and vulnerable children, the governor played politics with people's lives.

This was particularly true in CalWORKs, a successful program created on a bipartisan basis that meets the goals of getting people to work and helping poor children. Enacted in 1997 with Republican Governor Pete Wilson's heavy involvement, CalWORKs has contributed \$12 billion in savings to the state budget since it began, as welfare rolls dropped and dollars were shifted to other state programs. The program brings in \$3.9 billion in federal funds to the state each year, boosting our economy with \$6 billion in economic output, 137,000 private and public sector jobs and \$130 million in sales tax revenues. But budget deals over the last few years eroded the program's effectiveness and threaten to plunge it into further confusion if changes the governor demanded are allowed to take effect in mid-2011.

Cutting support for low-income families may have scored a few politically popular points, but where has it left California?

--Fewer CalWORKs recipients are being placed into jobs. Reductions to the program sought by the Schwarzenegger administration led to \$570 million in cuts that went directly toward moving welfare

recipients into the workforce, including a 2009 measure that turned back the clock on welfare reform by eliminating work requirements for 60,000 families on aid with young children. Families were essentially told to stay home instead of going to work, and delay their transitions to work and off aid.

--Because of the governor's recent Stage 3 Child Care veto, families who have successfully left CalWORKs are forced to choose between losing their jobs and going back on welfare, or keeping their jobs but leaving their children home alone or with unqualified child care providers. This short-sighted move means 81,000 children of 60,000 working parents will lose quality child care. The governor's unnecessary action will force thousands more people to join the ranks of California's unemployed.

--The governor's additional CalWORKs "reforms," scheduled for 2011, would further dismantle the bipartisan agreement on welfare reform, and result in conflicting rules and incentives for families. Examples include case reviews for some families who are already working; grant reductions during a one-year "sit out" period for parents, even those who are working, delaying their final year on aid; and a revised policy that actually delays sanctions for non-compliance.

--There is a reignited public misperception that these programs are ripe with fraud and that families are taking advantage of the temporary assistance available under CalWORKs. The governor used a catchy phrase -- "waste, fraud and abuse" -- despite the fact that reports and audits repeatedly found little to no fraud, counties routinely screen cases for inconsistencies that could point to fraudulent activity, and data did not support his claims.

It didn't have to be this way.

The governor had a tremendous opportunity to roll up his sleeves and try to help mend the tattered safety net for children and families.

The state Department of Social Services utilized an

enormous opportunity provided by the Obama administration to work with counties and put 35,000 people to work in the last year in subsidized employment slots funded through the federal stimulus package.

But it was an anomalous action, and came at the same time the governor sought cuts that removed people from the workforce. Amidst the crisis and the possibilities of subsidized employment, he could have held up social service programs as precisely the way to get people back to work and help California's economy recover. He could have taken pride in supporting a welfare-to-work model that state and federal policy experts agree is an example for successfully improving the lives of people and the fiscal outlook of a state.

That he chose otherwise leaves a legacy that no one should be proud of.

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