

The Letters Page

Prevention means a hand up, not a handout

"Supply and demand" are not usually terms associated with government, since it is difficult to demonstrate that indeed a relationship exists between the taxes used to finance government services and the demand of any one individual for services. But as former Santa Clara County Executive Sally Reed pointed out in her July 9 commentary, "Scarce Resources," they are concepts that government — specifically, county government — will have to come to terms with in an era of tight budgets and soaring demand for services.

Of course, county governments are not the only soldiers on this battlefield. The conflict between scarce public resources and claims on those resources is being played out at every level, from City Hall to Capitol Hill.

While the problems that Reed confronts as chief administrative officer of Los Angeles County loom on a much grander scale, they nevertheless represent a fundamental re-evaluation of government priorities that began with the passage of Proposition 13 and continue today.

Our focus must be on creating a solid foundation for the long-term needs of our communities, not on short-term fixes that merely tide us over from year to year. A long-term view means addressing problems before they reach the crisis stage, as they clearly have in Los Angeles County. It means directing our precious government resources toward preventive programs that reduce the demand for more costly government services.

It is much cheaper in the long run to provide an expectant mother with prenatal care than to care for an unhealthy baby. Investments in treatment for mental health out-patients at an annual cost of \$2,200 per patient make much more fiscal sense than housing the mentally ill in a jail at a cost of \$27,000 a year.

As Reed suggests, when resources are scarce, priorities must be re-evaluated. We Californians learned recently that spending on prisons has now outstripped funds dedicated to higher education. Is this the best use of our limited government resources? Is it prudent to reduce opportunities to obtain the very skills necessary to succeed in today's high-tech job market when government is already struggling to accommodate the needs of the unemployed and uninsured?

"Prevention" is not a liberal code word for more social programs. Rather, it is an approach to setting government priorities based on the premise that it is wiser, both morally and fiscally, to address community problems at their root rather than focusing on their costly aftermath.

The key to limiting demand on government services is to provide each of us with the tools to succeed and to emphasize personal responsibility.

While Reed's distinction between "taxpayers and "taxtakers" may be realistic, drawing a line between "us" and "them" is ultimately counterproductive. As the provider of last resort, county government has a special obligation to meet head-on issues of poverty and despair that often result in lifestyles replete with unhealthy choices that destroy individual dreams and burden the rest of us, who must pay for the consequences.

Reed eloquently describes the crisis faced by county governments in reconciling the dwindling supply of taxpayer dollars with the skyrocketing demand for services that will force us as a society to make agonizing choices about whose needs to serve and whose to ignore.

That time may have already come for Los Angeles County. But in Santa Clara County, while we still have the opportunity, let's give prevention a try. Our future depends on it.

— James T. Beall Jr.
Supervisor, Santa Clara County