

# Letter: Ex-director defends EDC senior services

***Publisher's note: The following email was sent to the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors on May 18 from John Litwinovich, El Dorado County Community Services-Human Services Department director from 1982-2007.***

Dear members of the board,

Three years ago I sent your board a message regarding our county's senior services. In light of current fiscal challenges, I am resending it. The background information on Community Services is important for budget discussions, as is the fact that you do have options for reducing costs and strengthening services.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions. Thank you.

John Litwinovich

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December 12, 2014

Members of the board,

During challenging budgetary times, talk of austerity measures and cuts in services are the norm. As you are a board in transition facing such challenges, the following is a brief history and some thoughts on Community Services, your vitally important safety net for seniors.

Our county's senior programs, among the best in California, were developed over four decades. Prior board members, including Dub Walker, Bob Dorr, Pat Lowe, John Upton, Jack Sweeney ... indeed all of your predecessors to varying degrees ... worked before you to build the compassionate, efficient

countywide service delivery system that you now support. Millions of senior nutrition meals have been served, thousands of at risk elders have been protected through senior legal services, tens of thousands have been assisted by housing programs, utility bill support, home weatherization, senior day care and a host of other services that help seniors remain healthy, independent and in their own homes.

Few things the county does touch as many lives in such meaningful ways on an ongoing basis. And at the heart of every effort have been the staff and volunteers of Community Services, some of your most dedicated, knowledgeable and hard working employees and community members.

Thirty-five years ago, the Board of Supervisors took steps to ensure resources went directly into services. Instead of accepting a future under the Sacramento Regional Area Agency on Aging, and instead of contracting out with other entities, the board fought for autonomy and local control, reducing three potential administrative layers to one, and created our own direct service Area Agency on Aging.

In 1982, again placing seniors first, the board reaffirmed its commitment to having services provided by county employees. Two decades later, El Dorado County was at the forefront in the writing and passage of state legislation to ensure local control throughout California for federal energy assistance and other resources so vital to elders.

Over time, board members, staff and volunteers worked not only to expand service sites, but to build community facilities to better serve our residents.

That's four decades of building something very special, placing our elders first, in a caring, compassionate and cost-effective manner.

Times change. While the inspiration of wonderful advocates from the past like Moni Gilmore and Genevieve Stirnaman lives

on, new, well-intentioned folks are arriving with their own ideas. For your sake, and theirs, the following are suggestions regarding senior services, both missteps to avoid and good measures to embrace.

Do not fall for the argument that someone else can or will provide these services better, more efficiently, or even less expensively. Audits and studies have shown our programs are run very efficiently with excellent quality services. Perhaps alternative providers may be found who might, in the short run, do something remotely comparable on the cheap. Hopefully, no one will propose replacing our excellent senior services delivery system with something less.

Do not fall for the misguided argument that senior programs place the county at risk, and thus should be contracted out to reduce that risk. Obviously, the county already accepts much higher risks in providing other services. However, more importantly, each year there are thousands of elders in our county who are at risk of abuse, exploitation, hunger, isolation and a host of other challenges addressed by senior legal, nutrition and other programs. Does county government exist to serve and protect its citizens, or simply to serve and diminish risks to itself? Beware of anyone who advocates for the latter.

Do not fall for the argument that the only way to meet budget goals is to cut or contract out vital services. This is not so, as explained below.

If you have not done so already, go and visit Community Services. Meet the front line senior nutrition staff, volunteers and, most importantly, the elders being served. Tag along with a volunteer on their home delivered meal route and see who's being helped. Talk with the senior legal staff and learn about the wide range of cases and the tremendous impact this service has for at risk elders. Visit senior day care and meet the participants. Every place you go, talk with the

staff, the volunteers and the service recipients. Become an advocate in continuing to strengthen the service system.

If you hear that the programs are too expensive to operate, begin (and end) by asking how much is being spent on administrative overhead. The programs themselves are primarily federally and state funded, substantially supplemented by donations, fees and county support. Direct service staff are paid modestly and minor adjustments in service levels have always been made in response to board priorities and fluctuations in funding.

Unfortunately, in recent years, especially with the development of a super agency structure, administrative overhead has gone through the roof. Historically, Community Services functioned best with a small team of involved administrators who knew the programs, the staff, the volunteers and the service recipients. There were few layers of bureaucracy and little duplication of effort. Services were driven by senior needs rather than institutional needs. Current fiscal challenges are due not to direct service staff, who remain as capable and dedicated as ever, but to a top heavy and costly administrative structure. Again, it comes down to weighing the needs of citizens versus the perceived needs of a very substantial county and agency administrative structure. You do have a choice.

Begin with the premise that continuing to strengthen senior services, rather than beginning to dismantle them, is an administrative rather than a personnel challenge. In Community Services, you have fine employees from the lowest paid staff to the agency director. Perhaps there are untried ways of substantially reducing overhead in the current organizational structure. If not, Community Services needs to be allowed to again thrive on its own as a separate, thrifty department. In either case, our county's seniors need your continued support and commitment to maintaining services.

In Community Services you have been entrusted with something special, a true gem among the many fine departments of county government. Please oversee it carefully, as our seniors are depending on you.

Thank you for your consideration and support.

**John Litwinovich, Community Services-Human Services Department  
director 1982-2007**