

Opinion: Why are EDC seniors being singled out?

By Larry Weitzman

El Dorado County has one of the highest per capita percentage of seniors in California. So, it is understandable that the county has had a longstanding senior legal program and a very successful one at that; handling a multitude of problems and protecting seniors from being preyed upon, seeing 2,000 clients a year.

It costs the county about \$250,000 a year, which is supplemented by about \$95,000 in private donations and a \$50,000 federal grant. It's a miniscule portion of the county General Fund budget of about \$280 million.



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Senior legal is about to come crashing down. The new county budget is canceling the program and laying off a staff of 3.5 employees, including a part-time lawyer, a full-time lawyer, plus a paralegal and a secretary. Out of 1,861 county employees, the only layoffs are to senior legal. Why is there a war on seniors? My supervisor, Mike Ranalli, would not give me a straight answer about protecting senior legal. Is Ranalli AWOL in this war?

Senior legal was informed of the pending layoffs on about May 18, a few days before the senior member of the staff was going

out of the country for three weeks. More appalling is the plight of the new full-time senior legal attorney who left her career at a law firm to become the new full-time attorney at senior legal who started on May 1, just 18 days prior. According to the proposed budget, she will be getting a pink slip no later than Aug. 4. Effectively this new attorney was fired before she was hired as staff had to know prior to May 1 that senior legal was being cut from the budget as county budgets, ours included, take months to prepare. Shameful and cruel.

As to losing senior, the proposed budget at page 281 said: "The CAO office believes that there are alternatives to providing legal aid to vulnerable populations, and these alternatives should be explored and promoted." What are the alternatives and what do seniors do while the CAO is off exploring. Try Timbuktu.

EL Dorado County is claiming it is due to budget cuts. They say departments are taking large cuts, but the reality is the only people who work for the county who are losing their jobs are the 3.5 people at senior legal. No other current county employee is being laid off, which means that 1,858 people will remain on the county payroll.

Something else is going on here and it is sinister. The newly hired public information officer, Carla Hass, has attempted to obfuscate the truth in a press release last week which actually confirmed the sinister nature of this hatchet job taking place against these four dedicated senior legal employees. Worse yet, against the seniors of El Dorado County. Why has the CAO moved heaven and earth so no other county employees will be laid off other than senior legal? Remember, the CAO works at the direction of the board.

Former mayor of Placerville and current chair of Friends of Seniors, Kathi Lishman, which helps with senior legal donations, among other things said, "The Board of Supervisors

cannot make these cuts in a vacuum." Well Lishman, they just did, at least in the proposed budget. There are no real cuts in spending on employees except for senior legal.

Lishman went on to say, "I am shocked to hear about senior legal, as it seems to have come out of nowhere, and is quite alarming. The services they provide to EDC seniors are extremely important. Senior legal has received about \$95,000 in donations from the community in the past 12 months, and meets with about 2,000 clients a year. Some of the elderly are home bound or institutionalized.

"They also provide legal resources for adult protective services. The programs that provide direct service to clients are the first ones to have their budgets reduced or cut, while overhead costs to these programs continually go up, often due to increased administrative costs."

Former El Dorado County Community Services/Human Services Director for 25 years (1982-2007), John Litwinovich, had the following to say of the proposed senior services cuts: "At this point, I think adding administrative positions is a mistake. The costly creation of agency level administrative positions is the principal reason senior services are in jeopardy. Now is not the time to be dismantling the needed senior continuum of care prior boards developed over decades. Rather, it's time to reconsider administrative layers and positions that have been added in recent years, positions that have drawn resources away from services

"Priority should be given to those county employees who directly serve the public, be they sheriff's deputies, road maintenance workers, front desk clerks, kitchen staff who prepare meals for homebound seniors, or Senior Legal attorneys, on whom so many vulnerable elders depend. These and other direct service positions, rather than an ample administrative structure, constitute county."

Now to the details. Recently, the newly hired county PIO, Hass, aka Doctor Spin, who costs the county 60 percent of the current entire county senior legal budget, wrote a press release to counteract a column that was published on this subject. My column said, "there are no position cuts to county administration."

Doctor Spin, employed by the county with your tax dollars, said the following with full CAO approval: "Correction: The recommended budget includes a net county cost reduction of approximately 8.2 percent within the general government functional group, which is primarily county administration. In addition, many high level administrative positions in the Community Development Agency, including the CDA director, assistant director of finance and administration, administrative secretary, administrative services officer and senior department analyst, have been cut from the budget, with all of the work being absorbed by other staff. The Chief Administrative Office is absorbing most of this work without any increases to net county cost."

Here are how spin doctors, this one included, mislead. Budgeted cuts are not spending cuts. It's like keeping two sets of books. The facts, which are straight from the county's proposed budget, while it sounds like there will be other layoffs, no actual currently employed county employees are losing their jobs and/or paychecks and pensions as are the staff in senior legal.

So as to the rest of 1,858 full time equivalent positions (FTEs), not one layoff or other termination other than the 3.5 county employees who work at senior legal. Not one, zero, zip, nada. Well, how could that be, when they brag about an 8.2 percent cut intimating that there will be layoffs in the CDA and/or administration?

Here's how. The county budgets for unfilled positions (vacancies) and filled positions whether they are paying a

salary for that position or not. The county in the past has carried about 8 percent vacant positions. EDC in the past has always effectively overbudgeted by including vacancies. That's the budget set of books. When departments don't spend their budgeted amount, it looks like they are saving money, which looks good to the public. It's easy to do when you overbudget. It's like having two sets of books. As the IRS knows, only dishonest people have and keep two sets of books.

How the CAO cut the budget is by eliminating unfilled (vacant) positions. While those are technically budget cuts, they are not spending cuts. In fact, spending is going up by several percentage points. The only actual cut in the budget with respect to the county's entire staff is senior legal. A reminder to the readers, the county (we taxpayers) pay about \$150,000 a year to be effectively lied to. Carla Hass didn't tell you the real truth, but covered it up with bureaucratic budgeting government obfuscation. This is a perfect example of the Mark Twain adage, "Figures don't lie, but liars figure."

And if there were an 8.2 percent real spending cut in administration, then we could understand an 8.2 percent cut in senior legal, but the reality is there is no spending cut in administration and a 100 percent spending cut to Senior Legal.

I don't know yet who is behind this evil Machiavellian machination, but these firings are not about saving the taxpayer money. There is something else going on and I intend to get to the bottom of it.

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