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**Guest Editorial**  
**End the Carve-out**



By Ron Risley, MD

**Why give mental health funds to a county government that doesn't provide care?**

Years ago, people with mental illness in Sacramento were cared for the same way we all were: a network of private providers would bill their patients, insurance, Medicare or Medi-Cal for their services. Inefficient and fraught with inequity though it was, it succeeded in providing care for most of the people who needed it.

Then Sacramento County took over the job. Private providers were effectively taken out of the picture through a byzantine system of paperwork and applications - almost universally denied.

The county got what is known in the trade as a "carve-out" - all the federal and state money destined to provide mental health care in the county got shifted to the county's Department of Health and Human Services, which then doled out some of the money to a select group of non-profit agencies charged with delivering mental health care.

The idea, I suppose, was to consolidate services and integrate systems to provide more efficient care.

Now it's 2009. The county's newly-rebranded Department of Behavioral Health Services has a budget of \$203 million and a population of fewer than 10,000 adults with mental illness. The Department is expecting about a 10 percent budget shortfall for next fiscal year, so its response - kept secret until mid-April - is to eliminate services to over two-thirds of our friends, neighbors, and family members with mental illness. With effectively no warning, a lifeline is being cut that thousands of Sacramentans rely on to remain active members of mainstream society.

The bureaucrats cynically claim to have "found" other sources of care for these patients: They are referring thousands to tiny mental health programs staffed for a few hundred patients. Thousands more are being told to ask for help from their primary care doctors - who haven't the time, clinic resources, training, or experience to comply.

More new patients are being denied entry into the system, with little regard for the severity of their illness. Others are being told that they simply are not sick enough to deserve care. The real tragedy, though, is that nobody involved in these decisions believes that they will save any money.

Those abandoned by DBHS will seek care in already overcrowded emergency rooms or the Sacramento County Mental Health Treatment Center, venues which provide county-funded care at costs far higher

than outpatient clinics. Those less fortunate will end up getting their care from their neighborhood drug dealers, from jails and prisons, and ultimately from the county coroner. Those increased costs will be borne by taxpayers, but the DBHS budget will balance.

The county intercepted federal and state mental health money with a promise to do a better job of providing care. Whether it ever succeeded or not is the subject of some debate, but now it won't be providing care at all to the majority of those who need it and qualify for it.

If you won't provide the care, you shouldn't take the money. Let's end the mental health carve-out now.

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