

The Daily Courier

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Talk of the Town: Don't cut help for the vulnerable

By LARRY D. GREEN JR.

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West Yavapai Guidance Clinic has provided high-quality treatment for thousands upon thousands of people for 44 years and knows all about what offering hope through effective treatment and recovery is all about.

As CEO of the largest nationally accredited agency for mental health, addiction, and crisis services in Yavapai County, I know well the tough choices lawmakers are making in Phoenix as a result of the state's budget crisis. I've been told that we just don't have the resources.

I also know our elected officials struggling with decisions have been sincere and historic advocates for critical health care, mental health and substance abuse treatment. Today's decisions are clearly heart-wrenching.

But with that said, it's the shallow answers that some are offering as proposals in Phoenix that will eliminate much hope in our community. They are short-sighted, and they will cost our communities more money in the long run with the potential of having to boot out more than 3,000 local people currently in treatment at WYGC.

The W.P. Carey School of Business at ASU recently reported that proposed cuts to health care would result in 42,000 lost jobs statewide. With thousands of jobs lost in healthcare, emergency rooms will fill up and police and fire personnel will be under more pressure to deal with the mentally ill and addicted while taking their focus off of the real criminal element and your safety. Is that really the best we can do? Should the state budget challenges be balanced on the backs of the most vulnerable in our community?

Like elected officials, I don't always get to make the easy choices. Our volunteer board of directors has put its faith in me, expecting that I will lead the agency with the maximum benefit of the community in mind, while maintaining a fiscally sound and high-quality, nonprofit organization.

We the voters expect our elected officials to make the choices that provide Arizonans with maximum benefit too. Sometimes, we have to stretch, and we must find ways that ensure people get the critical care they need. West Yavapai Guidance Clinic provided care in some form or fashion to 7,290 people just in the past year; that's just in 2009.

Proposals that some are either making formally "running up the flagpole" for public

opinion would leave people in our community without a critical healthcare safety net:

Let me tell you why we should be concerned.

HCR 2039 will temporarily suspend voter protected funds. What this means in you-and-me-speak is that Proposition 204 may be in jeopardy. Arizona voters approved Proposition 204 in 2000 and made it possible for people living at 100 percent of federal poverty level to receive health care services. Not just those living at 33 percent of poverty level. The people who are on AHCCCS who qualify currently are not earning a lot of money. AHCCCS, for those reading this who are not familiar, is the name of the Medicaid system in Arizona. How economically downtrodden must you be to qualify for care if this effort passes? A family of four could make only \$7,276. If you would, step back a moment, do the math, and try to think of people who you might know either directly or indirectly whom that would impact. If this reduction should pass, I estimate that 3,000 or more people that our agency serves (just our agency, serving Western Yavapai County) would lose their mental health and addiction treatment benefits which doesn't account for the many more that also will lose health care benefits.

In terms of local jobs, that translates to more than 100 jobs that our agency (again, just our agency) would have to eliminate. Statewide, AHCCCS' own estimates show that 351,000 people would lose health coverage statewide; 11,700 of those are children.

Is this really the best we can do in Arizona? Diminish services for people to the point that they have lost all hope? Is kicking the most vulnerable in our community to the curb without hope the right direction?

The statistics show that 1 in 4 American adults have a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year. And, in 2005, an estimated 22.2 million Americans 12 or older were classified with a substance use disorder. What is the price of hope, and the chance for recovery? What is the price for decisions that could mean life or death? Treatment works and pays big dividends. If treatment isn't available, what happens to the community? You be the judge, as this community will likely pay a much higher price in the long run.

Larry D. Green Jr. joined West Yavapai Guidance Clinic as CEO in July 2005. Prior to this, he was Executive Director of Child and Adult Behavioral Health Services for the EXCEL Group Regional Behavioral Health Authority in Yuma and LaPaz counties. Larry's career in behavioral health spans more than 25 years.

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