

THE VALLEY VOICE

Prop 1: homelessness or mental health – who gets the money?

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Raw emotion and charged commentary filled the room at 210 Café Tuesday, February 13, when Tulare County Voices' held a Prop 1 mental health and housing forum.

Proposition 1 on the voter guide says, "Authorizes \$6.38 billion in bonds to build mental health treatment facilities for those with mental health and substance use challenges; provides housing for the homeless."

The forum's purpose according to moderator Paul Hurley, "is to provide some insight into how this measure would help improve two intractable problems in California: mental illness and homelessness," but after the panel introduced the proposition, followed by some heated discussion, the audience was just as confused than when they arrived.

On the panel were: Natalie Bolin, Tulare County, Director of Mental Health Services; Ralph Nelson, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI); Betsy McGovern-Garcia, Vice-President, Self-Help Enterprises (SHE); and LaTanya Ri'Chard, founder of Peer Voices of Merced County.

The panel was in agreement on what the measure would do and what was going to be cut, but they did not agree on how to vote.

Nelson and McGovern-Garcia were in favor of Prop 1. Bolin said that the county was taking a neutral position due to the cuts in youth services and Ri'Chard was a hard no.

(McGovern-Garcia said her opinion of the proposition did not necessarily reflect that of SHE.)

The panel agreed that the homeless cannot be successfully treated unless they are living in a stable environment. But Californians Against Proposition 1, and the panel, acknowledged that money for mental health services for children and youth, wellness centers, and suicide prevention, just to name a few, was going to be cut and diverted to building housing and mental health facilities.

Ri'Chard added that the majority of people suffering from mental illness already have a stable living situation and that the services on the chopping block are working and desperately needed.

What's in Prop 1

Bolin explained that Proposition 1 has two parts.

The first part changes how money can be used in the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA).

Bolin said, "It's not reducing our MHSA money. It's changing how we spend our money."

MHSA levied a one percent tax on incomes over \$1 million per year in 2005 acquiring the name the "millionaire's tax." The act required that the money collected from the tax be used for mental health services and typically raises between \$2 billion and \$3.5 billion each year.

Currently, 95 percent of the tax goes directly to the counties and the rest of the money goes to the state.

Under Prop 1, that would be changed: the state would receive 10% of the MHSA funds, and the counties' share would be reduced to 90%, meaning less money would be available to the counties for mental health services.

In addition, Prop 1 diverts 30% of the counties' MHSA funds used for prevention and early intervention mental health services and requires the counties spend those funds on housing.

The second part of Prop 1 is a \$6.4 billion bond.

The \$6.4 billion would be earmarked to build more facilities for mental health care and drug or alcohol treatment and more housing for people with mental health, drug, or alcohol challenges. Seventy percent of the bond money would go towards facilities and thirty percent would go toward housing.

After 30 years the state will have paid \$9.3 billion to pay back the bond which would come out of the General Fund.

"In addition to funding 6,800 beds in facilities treating mental illness and addiction, the \$6.4 billion bond would create up to 4,350 new homes for people who need mental health and addiction services — 2,350 of which would be reserved for veterans," states the Legislative Analyst Office.

Hurley pointed out that California has an estimated homeless population of more than 180,000 and that according to a Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) report only 13,000 units, at most, are going to be built with the bond money.

“How is Tulare County going to make out in all this?” he asked the panel.

“Not well,” Nelson said — Los Angeles takes 50% of MHSA’s money, he added.

Ri’Chard said that Prop 1 is a “one size fits all.”

“We need to have something that works for everybody. What’s going to work in Tulare [County] is not going to work in Los Angeles, but they are trying to make it fit,” she said.

Will Prop 1 help or hurt?

McGovern-Garcia started the discussion on if Proposition 1 will help or hurt in terms of serving the mentally ill.

She said the proposition will bring in resources to generate new housing such as the newly constructed Lofts in Visalia that provides 80 new living spaces. It will also build more facilities that provide beds for those suffering from substance abuse.

On the other hand she said, Prop 1 will cut funds used as supportive services for the mentally ill.

But McGovern-Garcia said that ultimately Prop 1 “was going in the right direction” and that she personally supported it.

“We can’t treat people with mental illness who live under a bridge. They need housing,” Nelson said.

He said the original priority for MHSA was to serve the severely mentally ill, get them services, and get them off the street.

“We need more housing for people with persistent mental illness and who are homeless, and this bill will provide some of those houses,” he said.

He explained Prop 1 expands the number of people who qualify to be served by the same pot of money, which is a problem. Originally, MHSA funds could only be spent on people who were persistent and severely mentally ill. Prop 1 expands that definition to include Veterans and people suffering from drug and alcohol abuse, he said.

Bolin concurred that MHSA will be expanded from people who were suicidal, homicidal or gravely disabled due to mental illness, to include people suffering from substance abuse, living in an unsafe living environment, or who have untreated medical conditions.

“Everything is spread out much thinner, so we are going to have to use the same money for more people,” said Nelson.

On the positive side, Bolin said the proposition will tackle the severe shortage of psychiatric beds. She said that right now when the mentally ill are put on a psychiatric hold, the hold expires before they are even able to receive treatment.

Seventy percent of Prop 1 money will go towards building out psychiatric facilities according to the LAO report.

Nelson agreed saying that if an individual is found incompetent to stand trial and they need to be in a facility to restore competency, “in Tulare County, it takes one to two months sitting in a jail waiting for an open bed to come up just to be treated.”

But Bolin did agree that Prop 1 will cut funds for prevention and that is why Tulare County Health and Human Services has taken a neutral stance on the measure.

Ri'Chard was in agreement that California needs more housing, which Prop 1 does, but she does not agree with doing it at the expense of mental health.

Ina Evangelho, an attendee, said after the forum, "the more I think about all that was said, the more I realize that the current status quo just is not good enough. We need those mental health hospitals, we need more affordable housing. The original MHSA that provides all the money our current system works with was enacted over 20 years ago, and the situation has gone from bad to critical."

Involuntary lock up

A member of the audience expressed their concern for people losing their civil rights when subjected to an involuntary lockup.

Bolin acknowledged the person's concerns saying, "What qualifies as a psychiatric hold will expand under Prop 1 which does take away your rights. It is an involuntary hold."

Nelson explained one of the reasons to expand the definition of who can be locked up was that 50% of people who have a mental illness don't realize they have a mental illness, and that's when the mandatory lockup is necessary.

Ri'Chard was critical of this part of the proposition saying, "hospital beds are not homes."

"When you lock someone away you can't expect them to get better. When you lock someone in a jail how do they come out? A better criminal," she said.

"I want housing to be voluntary, and not lock people up, while at the same time not lose services. Why take away services that are working?" said Ri'Chard."

Why do we have to choose?

Towards the end of the forum an audience member voiced her frustration, "why do we have to choose?"

She said it seemed to her that supportive services treat the mentally ill, and without these services there will be more mentally ill on the street.

Ri'Chard said that she has firsthand experience with mental illness and peer counseling.

"I wouldn't be here today without it," she said.

She gave the example that if a bipolar person loses their counseling due to the cuts, they then may lose their job, then their car, then they will be homeless.

"We need a trickle up with more housing, not a trickle down," Ri'Chard said