

Response to draft County Budget and Core Service Policies

March 3, 2009

Background:

The **mission of the Contractors' Alliance** is to ensure that county residents have access to high-quality health and social services, provided through a network of nonprofit, community-based organizations in partnership with the county. The Alliance's 22 members serve thousands of Contra Costa residents with mental health, family support and many other services important to our community's quality of life.

Alliance members work in partnership with the county to provide a continuum of care for our most vulnerable residents. The Alliance's mission is very much in line with the County's own mission, which is "providing public services that improve the quality of life of our residents and the economic viability of our businesses."

Our position on the proposed County Budget and Core Service Policies:

- (1) The Alliance understands that as county leaders, you are faced with making very difficult decisions. However, in establishing budget policies, **the county has a moral duty** to strive to prevent harm to the county's most vulnerable residents, and to use limited county resources to serve the greatest good with the greatest efficiency.
- (2) The County's list of "**Core Values**" includes "clients and communities", "partnerships" and "quality services." All three of these values underscore the importance of the county's relationship with its nonprofit, community-based service providers such as the members of the Contractors' Alliance.
- (3) The draft Budget Policy defines "**core county services**" as "**essential to the health and safety of county citizens and for which there are no other organizations or institutions able to provide them (safety net services).**" The Alliance responds as follows:
 - a) **Community-based organizations should be at the table when deciding what's "essential."** We are stakeholders in this process, and we have important knowledge and perspective that comes from being based in the communities we serve.
 - b) **Defining "core services" simply as "mandated services", as this report does, means that the County is letting outside entities (i.e. the state and federal government) set its priorities.** Instead, **local values ought to drive the conversation.** For instance, the report lists animal services patrol and animal care as "core services," but people care services (e.g., adoptions, elder services, veterans' services, public health clinics, etc.) is listed "discretionary." Does the County really believe that animals are more important than people? And emergency preparedness may seem discretionary – until there's a disaster. **Just because a service is mandated doesn't mean it's critical. And just because a service is not mandated doesn't mean it's not critical.** While the county is required to provide mandated services, county leaders' priority setting shouldn't stop there. In the past, the county's policy was to make across-the-board funding cuts in all departments, which abdicated county leaders' responsibility to make informed, thoughtful decisions. The count is now at risk of making this mistake again, by too-simply defining "core services" as "mandatory services" and then neglecting to further establish and prioritize local needs and services. **There's a lot at stake;** the county's definition of "core services" will have significant impact on budget cuts decisions made for the next two years and beyond. That's why it's important to make sure that the policies guiding these decisions are thoughtful and appropriate.

- c) When the county is considering what **other "services and institutions" are available to pick up the slack if county programs are cut back or eliminated**, a **clear assessment** must be made of what capacity, if any, existing community-based organizations service providers have to take on additional clients and/or provide new or expanded services. The community-based organizations themselves must be invited to the table from the beginning to give significant input into this assessment. This assessment process is particularly important in light of the significant funding reductions that community-based organizations are currently experiencing from all sources, both public and private, that are severely curtailing their ability to expand or even just maintain their own core services.
- d) **Cash management policies:** It is in no way acceptable for the county to delay payments to CBO contractors in any shape or form, period. Nonprofit organizations operate on a thin margin by design, and we have already been hurt by the state's fiscally irresponsible practice of delayed contract payments. Resorting to late payments is not only unfair; it threatens the stability of the very safety net the county is working so hard to preserve.
- e) **CBOs can, and should, be vital partners** in helping the county **explore innovative and cost-effective ways** to deliver services in partnership with community-based organizations. Community-based organizations can and should be part of the solution.

The Alliance advocates for **two additional policies** to be established:

- a) In requesting the **Impact Statement** that is included with the draft budget each year, the Board should require the county to document not only county department impacts (# jobs cuts, # fewer clients served, programs to be closed), as it currently does; departments should also be required to document the **impact on community-based contractors** whose contracts are being considered for reduction or elimination, likewise showing jobs lost, # few clients served, programs to be closed. The affected Alliance members would agree to provide this data to the county for inclusion in the report.
- b) **Provide longer notice** (at least 30 days) to community-based contractors that may potentially be affected by program changes or contract cuts, well before the proposed cuts come to the Board.
- c) Direct department heads to **engage with community-based contractors throughout the year** to discuss service needs and trends, identify potential cost saving strategies, and otherwise treat community-based organizations as the full partners they should be in assessing needs, delivering services, and offering cost-saving solutions.