

Help for the severely mentally ill

ON MENTAL HEALTH

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Californians with seriously mentally ill family members rejoiced when voters passed the [Mental Health Services Act](#), which created a robust stream of tax revenues for their loved ones' treatment. Eight years later, the funding is a huge success, but the spending has proved a bait-and-switch.

The 1 percent tax on a millionaire's income is generating about \$1 billion a year, but instead of spending it on the seriously mentally ill, county agencies are spending it on the not seriously mentally ill.

To address this, California legislators have introduced four bills to clearly establish what voters were told in 2004 when they approved [Proposition 63](#): that the revenues would fund existing mental health programs for the seriously ill. State Senate President Pro Tem [Darrell Steinberg](#), D-Sacramento, Prop. 63's author, acknowledged the switch when he spoke with the Chronicle's editorial board last month about his bill to deal with the ambiguity between the act's intent and its implementation.

Instead of directing funds for treatment to keep individuals with mental illness from becoming more severely ill, the regulations directed the money to services to calm the anxious and to general wellness programs like yoga. In some cases, Prop. 63 funds actually were used to threaten lawsuits against counties that tried to use the funds for programs for the seriously mentally ill.

The rules also forbid spending funds on [Laura's Law](#), which authorizes a court to order outpatient treatment for individuals with a history of mental illness. To date, only Nevada County (where [Laura Wilcox](#) and two others were killed by a seriously mentally ill man who had resisted his family's attempt to get him treatment) and Los Angeles County, which has a small program, have adopted [Laura's Law](#).

The impediment is the requirement for each county board of supervisors to adopt the law. Sen. [Leland Yee](#), D-San Francisco, has introduced a bill to drop the need for that vote.

Factions of the mental health community oppose [Laura's Law](#) as an incursion on civil rights, arguing that Prop. 63 money should be devoted to the many waiting for mental health treatment. "Is there a reason to put people who do not want services ahead of people who do?" said [Eduardo Vega](#), the executive director of the [Mental Health Association of San Francisco](#).

The mentally ill who seek treatment are not less worthy but, in the battle for resources, their needs may be less acute. The law should prioritize the interests of the seriously mentally ill and the public safety.

Legislation

Four new bills for the seriously mentally ill:

SB585 (Steinberg/Correa) clarifies that Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63) funds may be used to implement Laura's Law.

SB664 (Yee/Wolk) states that counties may implement Laura's Law without a special vote by supervisors.

AB1265 (Conway) allows individuals under Laura's Law to receive treatment for up to one year (instead of the previous six-month maximum).

AB1367 (Mansoor) Similar to SB585.

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