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Reducing Poverty in California

Four Ways to Evaluate the Governor's 2017-18 Budget Proposal

On Tuesday Governor Brown will release his budget proposal for the 2017-18 fiscal year. Many anticipate that it will be a “hold the line” budget that makes few new commitments even though California has enjoyed a long period of economic growth and increased budget surpluses. While some Californians have benefited from the recovery, many Californians have been left behind and still need help from government. Advocates for the poor will be looking to see if the Governor’s proposed budget addresses fundamental needs of Californians who are still struggling. Here are four areas that deserve media scrutiny.

- Does the budget address housing affordability for low income Californians?
- Does the budget protect the gains made in providing health care to millions of Californians?
- Does the budget reduce deep poverty among poor families with children and reduce poverty among persons unable to work due to disability or age?
- Does the budget provide legal services to vulnerable Californians who face deportations, eviction, or a loss of public benefits and services?

Address the Affordable Housing Crisis

California has the highest poverty rate in the nation when housing costs are factored in and the state’s lowest-income residents pay an average of 68% of their income in rent, leaving little left for food, transportation, medication, and other necessities. The state is short over 1.5 million units affordable to very low- and extremely low-income residents alone and lower-income households are facing unprecedented levels of displacement. Tackling the affordable housing crisis in a meaningful way will require a comprehensive approach that includes:

- A focus on increasing production at the low-, very low-, and extremely low-income levels;
- One or more permanent sources of significant state funding for affordable housing programs;
- Protecting existing sources of affordable housing and preventing the displacement of lower-income people and families;
- Strong enforcement of existing laws that require all jurisdictions to support the production of housing affordable to lower-income people and families.

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Protect Health Care Gains

California has led the nation in reducing the number of uninsured people through the successful implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Over 5 million Californians now have comprehensive health coverage through Medi-Cal due to the implementation of the ACA and another 1.5 million Californians receive subsidies to purchase Covered California health plans. California's uninsured rate has dropped in half, from 17.2% in 2013 to 8.6% in 2015, thanks to the Governor and legislative leadership in implementing the ACA. Western Center will be analyzing the budget to make sure it protects the gains that have resulted in a healthier California and continues to ensure equitable access to affordable, comprehensive, quality health care for low-income consumers.

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Increase Public Benefits

The housing crisis is largely a function of two interrelated problems: A lack of rental housing that is affordable to people living at or below the poverty level and a lack of income by those who must rely on public benefits to pay for housing. Low public benefit levels are a significant cause of homelessness as families and individuals face eviction when they cannot afford basic rent in California. Once evicted finding new housing can be extremely challenging if not impossible. Unfortunately, CalWORKs grants for a family of three are just 43 percent of the federal poverty level and SSI grants for seniors and persons living with disabilities is just 90 percent of the federal poverty level. Robust grant increases for both programs would help these Californians stay in their homes.

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Legal Services for Vulnerable Californians

A network of nearly 100 nonprofits provides free civil legal services to California's most vulnerable residents, including families living in poverty, immigrants, senior citizens, people living with disabilities, domestic violence survivors, foster children, low-wage workers, and the homeless. These nonprofits, operating on shoestring budgets, collectively serve hundreds of thousands of Californians annually. The state provides funding for their efforts through the Equal Access Fund (EAF), established in 1999 to help close the justice gap for the state's poorest residents. In 2016, Governor Brown and the Legislature recognized the importance of legal services by increasing the EAF from \$10 million to \$15 million, the first funding increase via the General Fund since the EAF's creation. This additional \$5 million substantially increases the capacity of legal services organizations to deliver services statewide, and will be essential to protecting the well-being of Californians in 2017 given expected changes in federal policy. Western Center hopes that the Governor will propose \$15 million in continued EAF funding in his forthcoming budget. We also hope that he will support Legislative proposals to fund immigration counsel and other legal services for individuals facing deportation, a vital ingredient to safeguarding the due process rights and civil liberties of every Californian.

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