

Contra Costa Times editorial: Special sessions a chance to get priorities right

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Sometimes an apparent setback can turn out to be a big victory. Let's hope that is the case with Gov. Jerry Brown's refusal to direct more state funding into the cash-starved statewide system that serves those with developmental disabilities.

There's a great opportunity now for Sacramento to solve the system's problems. In the state budget deal that Brown reached with legislators, he rejected the modest funding increase that had been proposed and that we supported.

But included in the budget deal was Brown's call for two special sessions of the Legislature, one of which will deal with funding for this vulnerable population. And that could turn out much better than had Brown accepted the legislative proposal.

The Lanterman Coalition, an umbrella group of organizations that serves the developmentally disabled, has campaigned for a 10 percent funding boost in the coming budget year to halt the withering of needed services. The Legislature's proposed increase amounted to less than half that.

But the coalition has been calling for aid in three forms: the immediate 10 percent funding boost, a complete revamp of service rates and funding for regional center operations to make them sustainable, and annual 5 percent across-the-board funding increases until that revamp has been implemented.

It's the second prong, the revamp of state rates to make the system whole again, sustainable through the years, that's the crux of the matter. The 10 percent and 5 percent increase requests were just ways to buy time and keep the system from collapsing before it's fixed.

As we wrote three months ago, the system that supports roughly 280,000 individuals with developmental disabilities is in a crisis that few outside that community understand. State support has been declining since the 1990s, and then things got much worse in the Great Recession when funding was slashed by more than \$1 billion. State reimbursement rates for services have remained essentially flat for two decades, while the costs to provide services have grown.

As a result, case loads have ballooned at the state's 21 regional centers that are responsible for managing services for those with developmental disabilities. Skills development and job training have largely given way to mere caretaking as fewer skilled professionals have been willing to work for minimum wage. Service vendors -- providers of day and work programs, residential homes and the like -- have curtailed their offerings or even closed their doors.

As a result, many of these individuals are no longer receiving levels of service that are federally mandated. That must change.

Legislators have the opportunity to improve the lives of 280,000 vulnerable Californians, plus the millions who love them, care for them and guide their development. Do not fumble this opportunity.