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We can help needy, save taxpayers

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COMMUNITY VOICES

Compared with police and fire services, social services aren't glamorous, and they will always come last in a three-way vote. But there are a number of reasons why all cities and the county should set aside funds to ensure that some basic social services will be available and here is why:

· The first reason is equity -- everyone should pay a fair share to make sure that basic services are available when they are needed.

When a dog or a cat is homeless, we have a place to take it for help, and the cities and county pay to ensure that the services of the humane society will be available to find homes for as many of those animals as possible.

We don't do this for humans who are homeless, or mentally ill, or chronically ill -- but we should, and we can, if every city sets aside a per capita contribution to fund services at a regional service center.

· The second reason is that it is cheaper for the taxpayer.

There are homeless and people who are substance abusers, or who are mentally ill, or victims of domestic violence in every city. There are homeless children in every school in Volusia County. Our failure to fund adequate services to help people regain independence costs the taxpayers big dollars -- because those who are homeless are often in jail, at the emergency room or spending longer stays in hospital beds at taxpayer expense, because the cheaper (and much more effective) treatment or assistance isn't available.

It isn't possible -- or even desirable -- to replicate infrastructure to provide services in every single city. It is much more cost effective to have centralized service facilities to coordinate social services that deliver an array of help. But if we aren't going to have a homeless shelter, or a substance abuse treatment facility, or a domestic violence shelter in Ormond Beach, and one in Port Orange, and another in Deltona and so on, then every city needs to help to fund and support the services at regional facilities.

If we don't set aside funds to treat social needs, we will need still more dollars for more police, more paramedics, more jail guards, more cells and more hospital taxes to deliver indigent services.

We will also erode our own efforts to retain businesses and expand our business base, losing out on goods, services and sales taxes that we need to grow our local economy, and jobs that we need to generate for the future vitality of our community.

· The third reason is that it helps generate more dollars from state and federal sources.

If all the cities and the county collaborate in setting aside funds for social services at the local level, those funds can be used not just to fund services, but also serve as leverage for state and federal funds to deliver more and better services. No local match? We lose it all -- no support from local, state or federal funds.

· The fourth reason is that predictable funds allow for planning and predictability and generate long-term outcomes that are measurable.

Another bonus from set-aside funds is planning and predictability. At present, every service is a creature of the moment -- the strategic planning, the building toward better outcomes can't be done when there is no predictability of funding. And the clients lose and the taxpayer loses, because we are not able to build programs that are tied to long-term outcomes that we can measure and track.

With set-aside funding, it becomes possible to establish performance goals and tie funding to outcomes. It becomes possible to retain excellence in case management professionals and track and reward long-term success in the programs that resolve

client issues and restore the highest number to functional independence. Those outcomes will also determine which agencies are going to get future appropriations because over time, the taxpayer and the governmental entity will be able to see clearly which agencies are achieving established community goals, and those are the agencies who should receive future funds.

Charles Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Present opened his cloak and showed Scrooge two desperately needy children: "They are Mankind's creatures," he said. "The boy is Ignorance. The girl is Want. Beware them both, but most of all beware this boy."

We need to get smart. Set-aside funding for social services is the best investment we will ever make in ensuring the quality of life for all of us in the community. Who would want to move to a community, buy a house, open a business in a place where there aren't any social services, and those in need of them wander the streets by the hundreds and thousands?

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