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Governor, Show a Little Care for the Mentally Ill

Steve Lopez
Points West

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Hey, Gov. Schwarzenegger, it's been too long since our last cigar. You busy the next few days?

Yeah, I know. You're always busy in budget season.

But that's all the more reason for us to get together. If you can squeeze it in, I'd like to introduce you to a few people who have caught some tragically tough breaks in life and now face the possibility of another: a \$55-million budget cut by you.

Sure, you've got a tough job and can't keep everybody happy, especially with your own party leaders yapping and barking for even deeper cuts. But the cut I'm talking about is heartless and idiotic, with all due respect. I'm talking about your proposed strangulation of the AB 2034 program, which provides 5,000 Californians with everything from lunch to counseling to housing.

Who are they?

They're castoffs who have lived under bridges and on sidewalks; people who have been beaten down, locked up and, finally, rescued. The thing they have in common is that they were struck down through no fault of their own. They're all mentally ill.

Before we light our smokes, I'll take you to meet Alan Guthrie, 48, who was once stabbed at 5th and San Pedro on skid row in L.A. Now he lives in supportive housing at the Lamp Community and says he has never had the combination of housing, counseling and other services he gets under AB 2034. He hopes he doesn't end up back out on the street because of a certain governor's knife work.

Then there's Charles Jordan, 51, another Lamp client whose AB 2034 benefits include an apartment at the Ballington on Wall Street. And by the way, governor, Jordan said he'd be happy to show you his apartment, share the story of all his hard knocks on the streets and tell you about the comfort he finally found when he was steered inside by Lamp outreach workers.

Yes, I know your argument for cutting the program. You say some of the same services are provided by Proposition 63, which was approved by voters in 2004 and taxes the wealthy to pay for mental health services.

But that's nonsense, and you know it. That money wasn't meant to give the state license to slash existing programs. It was for expanded services and for all the urgent needs unmet after decades of shameful under-funding, beginning with the shutdown of state hospitals.

"It would be plainly illegal" to eliminate AB 2034 funding because Prop. 63 is in place, says state Sen. Darrell Steinberg, who is fighting to keep the funding in the budget legislators hope to send to the governor any day now.

Steinberg, of Sacramento, said a cut would subvert the will of the people who voted for Prop. 63, and he predicts legal challenges.

Do you want that, governor? Do you want to get sued for eliminating a program that has rescued so many lives and been imitated around the country?

Lamp Director Casey Horan calls AB 2034 “hands down the most effective” program for bringing people in off the streets and restoring their dignity. She says the program has led to huge reductions in incarceration and hospitalization. So AB 2034 reduces other expenses, and it also makes it possible to leverage private and nonprofit investment in more housing.

There’s a great example of how it all works at a place called the Village, in Long Beach, which happens to be just a few blocks from the joint where you and I had our last cigar. Bring Maria too. I know she’ll love what she sees. I’m happy to set up a tour, and this time the stogies are on me.