

Commentary

Capel: A wise investment for taxpayers and vulnerable Texans

By LEA ANN CAPEL
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As legislators prepare to tackle the state's projected \$25 billion budget shortfall, they need to know how their actions will affect Texans like Sarah Jones.

Jones was convicted of theft, but she's not your run-of-the-mill hot-check writer. She believed that her bad checks would be covered by the millions of dollars she thought God had put in her bank account.

Sarah's mental illness resulted in more than jail time. She spent months in the state hospital, lived in group homes and ended up homeless. Fortunately, she got connected to her Community MHMR Center, where she received intensive treatment and rehabilitative and case management services that helped her get back on track toward an independent and productive life.

Today Sarah is living on her own, is an active member in her community and is writing a book about her life -- one that may have a happy ending, thanks to MHMR of Tarrant County.

In every Texas county, lives have been reformed, turned around and in some cases saved because of the investment previous state Legislatures made in our community center system of care.

The community centers across Texas provide crucial mental health and intellectual disability services close to home and before basic needs turn into an extensive strain on individuals, relatives and public systems. The centers leverage local, state and federal resources to create a system of care shaped by local decision-makers, local board members, local experts and local providers to implement solutions that are best for each community.

During the last two legislative sessions, Republicans and Democrats came together to make cost-effective and caring investments to strengthen this system, and their rationale was strong.

The demand for services is significant. One in 10 Texas families is affected by intellectual and developmental disability. In any given year, 1 in 5 Texans will have a mental disorder that

could cost them their job, damage their family or threaten their safety. For many Texas families, it is in tough economic times like these that such services are needed most.

Furthermore, the community centers provide care to a vulnerable population that often has few options other than public services. For these Texans, their community center truly is a safety net that allows them to live independent, productive lives at home in their own communities -- decreasing demand on more costly state facilities or hospitals.

Texas' commitment to community centers has been a wise investment for taxpayers.

Simply put, Community MHMR Centers help keep Texans with mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities out of emergency rooms, courtrooms, jails and state facilities. That was beneficial for the 400,000 Texans who received services last year, but it also saved millions in local and state expenses.

Just as the investments made in the community center system have paid significant dividends, cutting them will have immediate consequences in every Texas county, not only for those that rely on their center and the essential safety net it provides, but also for the state facilities, hospitals, courtrooms and county jails that will undoubtedly have to pick up the slack.

Everyone understands that our legislators may have to make substantive spending cuts. Yet we hope that the budget isn't balanced on the backs of vulnerable Texans like Sarah. Her story demonstrates how investments in local care have paid great dividends -- both human and financial.

We urge legislators to look to the community center system as a partner in providing meaningful and long-term benefits, not only to those Texans who depend upon it, but also to the taxpayers who will benefit from the long-term savings it provides.

Lea Ann Capel of Fort Worth is board chairwoman of MHMR of Tarrant County and wrote this on behalf of the board.
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