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## OPINION: UNION- BACKED BILL IS BAD NEWS FOR PATIENTS NEEDING COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH, OTHER SERVICES

By Charles “Chip” Huggins, CEO of Caminar for Mental Health

A bill winding its way through the legislature, Assembly Bill 1250 (Reggie Jones-Sawyer, D-Los Angeles), would drastically impede the ability of organizations like ours to provide essential services to youths and families in our community who need them most.

The bill, at its core, seeks to stop counties from contracting with community based organizations (CBOs), nonprofits, local businesses and other private providers of quality local services that counties and their residents rely on. Counties contract with organizations and businesses that have the expertise, capacity or ability to deliver services more efficiently.

Sponsors of the bill want to force all services to be provided directly by counties so they’ll be required to increase full-time staff. That ignores the fact that some essential public health, public safety and social services for the vulnerable are delivered more effectively or at a lower cost by local non-profit organizations and private businesses.

Caminar was built on a commitment to improve community-based support services and opportunities for people in the recovery process to live and work in the community. We provide a variety of services: family violence and abuse prevention and intervention, co-occurring disorder services, integrated physical and behavioral health services, crisis residential services, substance abuse treatment, supported housing, employment and education services, assisted outpatient treatment, prevention and treatment programs for transition age youth, school- based mental health services, and services for LGBTQ communities.

Our organization and other non- profit and for-profit providers of local services are in the direct crosshairs of AB 1250. The fallout will come at the expense of children and adults in not only San Mateo, Solano and Santa Clara counties, but all the families we serve throughout California.

Proponents of the bill claim it won’t limit contracting with non-government groups, but the clear intent of AB 1250 is to prohibit these private contracts.

For instance, the bill requires CBOs, nonprofits and local businesses to disclose personal information about its

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*-Charles “Chip” Huggins, CEO Caminar for Mental Health*

employees and officers, including salary and other private information. This not only raises significant privacy concerns, but it will chill private sector’s willingness to enter into contracts with counties to provide services.

Our organization deals with many sensitive and personal issues. Subjecting our employees to such a disclosure will certainly place their safety at risk.

AB 1250 also requires new bureaucratic auditing requirements at the expense of organizations like ours, and requires contractors to disclose extensive information on a monthly basis. These auditing and review requirements could create unnecessary gaps and delays in service delivery that can be detrimental to the people benefiting from these programs.

There’s no question about the proponents’ intent: they want to severely curtail or even stop the contracting for services.

By restricting counties’ abilities to provide services in the most cost-effective manner, AB 1250 will also increase costs for taxpayers and reduce funding available for other local services. For many fundamental programs, it will not be a matter of who will provide the service but if they can even be offered at all.

There is no legitimate policy problem that AB 1250 seeks to address. This is a pure political power play at the expense of essential services for our most vulnerable. For the sake of protecting health care, social services, mental health and public services, the Senate should reject AB 1250.

*Charles ‘Chip’ Huggins is CEO of Caminar for Mental Health in San Mateo. He wrote this for The Mercury News.*