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OPINION: AB 1250 ATTACKS COUNTY SERVICES FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE

By Bill Walker, Director of Kern Behavioral Health & Recovery Services.

Kern County, like all counties in California, is responsible for delivering critical local services to residents, including health and welfare, public safety and social services for the most vulnerable. Assembly Bill 1250 (authored by Assemblyman Reginald Jones-Sawyer, D-Los Angeles) will negatively impact counties' abilities to provide high-quality and cost-effective local services to residents who need them most.

That's because the bill will seriously undermine and could even eliminate counties' abilities to contract with community-based organizations, nonprofits, local businesses and other private providers of local services. These public/private partnerships give counties the ability to obtain and deliver expertise for certain local services.

The Kern County Behavioral Health and Recovery Services department provides comprehensive care for individuals with mental illnesses or addictions in our community. Our goal is to promote mental wellness and help those in need so they can recover and rejoin us as members of a thriving community.

The great County of Kern is more than 8,000 square miles. To fulfill our mission, it is essential that KernBHRS is able to contract with an extensive infrastructure of established and networked psychiatric, medical, clinical and substance use providers for adult and children services. These providers also enrich our many local communities with local jobs and local spending.

For the fiscal year beginning in July 2017 KernBHRS anticipates spending \$86 million with our contractor network, which is 44 percent of the KernBHRS overall preliminary budget. These dollars pay for services in every corner of the county.

AB 1250 seriously jeopardizes our ability to partner with these qualified experts to provide that care.

Supporters of the bill claim it won't limit contracting with non-government groups, but AB 1250 clearly intends to prohibit these private contracts. The bill inflicts severe restrictions and establishes new bureaucratic hurdles for the sole purpose of restricting private contracts.

“Assembly Bill 1250 ... will negatively impact counties' abilities to provide high-quality and cost-effective local services to residents who need them most.”

- Bill Walker, Director of Kern Behavioral Health & Recovery Services

For instance, the bill requires CBOs, nonprofits and local businesses to disclose personal information about its employees and officers. AB 1250 also requires new auditing requirements at the expense of private sector organizations, and requires contractors to disclose extensive information on a monthly basis. This not only raises significant privacy concerns, but it will chill private sector's willingness to enter into contracts with counties to provide services.

It's obvious proponents of this bill simply want to preclude counties from contracting with the private sector for the expertise and cost-effective services that are in the best interest of our local community.

Throughout Kern County and California, AB 1250 will negatively impact a broad range of local services including safe havens and counseling for children who are victims of sex trafficking; 911 emergency dispatch; homeless outreach and case management of emergency shelters, timely emergency and disaster response; foster care and adoption services, to name just a few.

For many essential programs, it will not be a question of who will provide the service, but whether the service can be offered at all under these restrictions.

By interfering with 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.

AB 1250 jeopardizes essential local services for our most vulnerable. The state Senate should reject this measure.