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New money for mental health care; Families hopes rise

Proposition 63 is revving up fueled by activists' passion

Second of Two Parts

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Darrell Steinberg, whose crusade to help California's mentally ill culminated in the passage of the landmark Proposition 63, got an early education in the power of grass-roots advocacy.

As a law student at the University of California at Davis in 1984, he led a successful student campaign to improve access for the handicapped at the law school. Two of Steinberg's closest friends were quadriplegics who could not access the mock courtroom in their wheelchairs, and the students successfully forced the university to install a lift.

Steinberg, a Sacramento lawyer and

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Democrat who is running next year for a local state Senate seat, learned a lesson that he would remember years later when he successfully pushed for Proposition 63: Get organized, then get the money.

"We organized, involved the press and found the money, which supposedly was not available," Steinberg recalled when, as a state Assemblyman, he returned to his former law school 20 years later to deliver the commencement speech.

Now, the money for community-based mental health care will finally become available.

Approved in November and still in its planning stages, Proposition 63 represents the most important changes to California's mental health system in decades. The changes are desperately needed: More than half of those surveyed in public opinion surveys say they have a relative or close friend with serious mental problems. For the first time, the families of the mentally ill will be directly involved in deciding how to spend the mental health funds.

Proposition 63 will provide an estimated $1 billion annually through a 1 percent tax on all annual income above $1 million. The money will go to community-based mental health care programs, which can apply for grants following Proposition 63's strict criteria. The money can be used only for local mental health care – including housing, training, therapy and counseling – and cannot be diverted to state correctional or parole programs. So far, $24 million has been allocated for the initial planning and review of local project proposals. By the end of the current fiscal year in June 2006, some $700 million is expected to be set aside for community mental health services.

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-Mayberg says.

The money has been a long time coming.

"We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to demonstrate to the state and the country that people with mental illness can lead productive lives, be part of our communities, live independently--and that with a decent system of supports and services, people do not have to be relegated to lives of hopelessness," Steinberg said.

Steinberg, a former Sacramento City Council member, made mental health care one of his principal campaign platforms when he ran for state Assembly in 1998.

Shortly after he took office, Steinberg introduced AB34, which initially provided $10 million to fund pilot projects for community services to the mentally ill. The bill was the direct progenitor of Proposition 63 and marked the first significant investment in mental health in decades.

One year after the pilot projects were funded in 1999, Steinberg said, "we found that the 1,000 people helped under AB34 were showing the beginnings of real success, with decreased hospitalizations and reduced homelessness." He points to impressive statistics from the AB34 projects: Participants had a 56 percent reduction in hospital stays, a 72 percent reduction in jail stays and a 65 percent increase in full-time jobs. The success of the pilot projects prompted Steinberg to push for more funding, and to take the matter directly to the voters during his final year in the Assembly, where he was termed-out in 2004.

Thus, Proposition 63 was born.

Steinberg and Rusty Selix, the longtime executive director of the Mental Health Association of California, led the Proposition 63 campaign, organizing a coalition of supporters who included the mentally ill and their families – people who historically were excluded from mental health policy-making. The coalition raised $5 million to place Proposition 63 on the ballot and secure its passage.

Officially called the Mental Health Services Act, it was approved with 53.4 percent of the vote. The mentally ill and their families are specifically included in the planning, implementation and staffing of the new law. Steinberg, meanwhile, chairs the 16-member Oversight and Accountability Commmission for Implementation of Proposition 63, which will be administered by the state Department of Mental Health.

Polling for the measure showed that a majority of people had a relative or friend with severe mental health problems, although the stigma against seeking care remained. "Public acceptance has been proven," says Selix. "But the willingness to talk openly about it among average people is another matter. Not every school, nor every employer, understands."

Clearly, after decades of neglect, the available funds will be stretched thin.

"The law was pretty specific," says Dr. Stephen Mayberg, a psychologist who has been director of the state Department of Mental Health for 12 years. "They wanted to make sure to expand services, not to duplicate or backfill services, and specific populations are targeted." Funding cannot be used for jail and prison or parole populations, and must avoid what Mayberg calls "the fail-first system" of previous years.

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Mayberg's department employs more than 10,000 people, many working in the remaining state hospitals which house some 4,700 people—mostly individuals who have been judged criminally insane or incompetent to stand trial. It is a much different population than was housed in 1961, when 36,0000 mentally ill were kept in state hospitals throughout California, before the "deinstitutionalization" of the hospitals under Govs. Ronald Reagan and Jerry Brown.

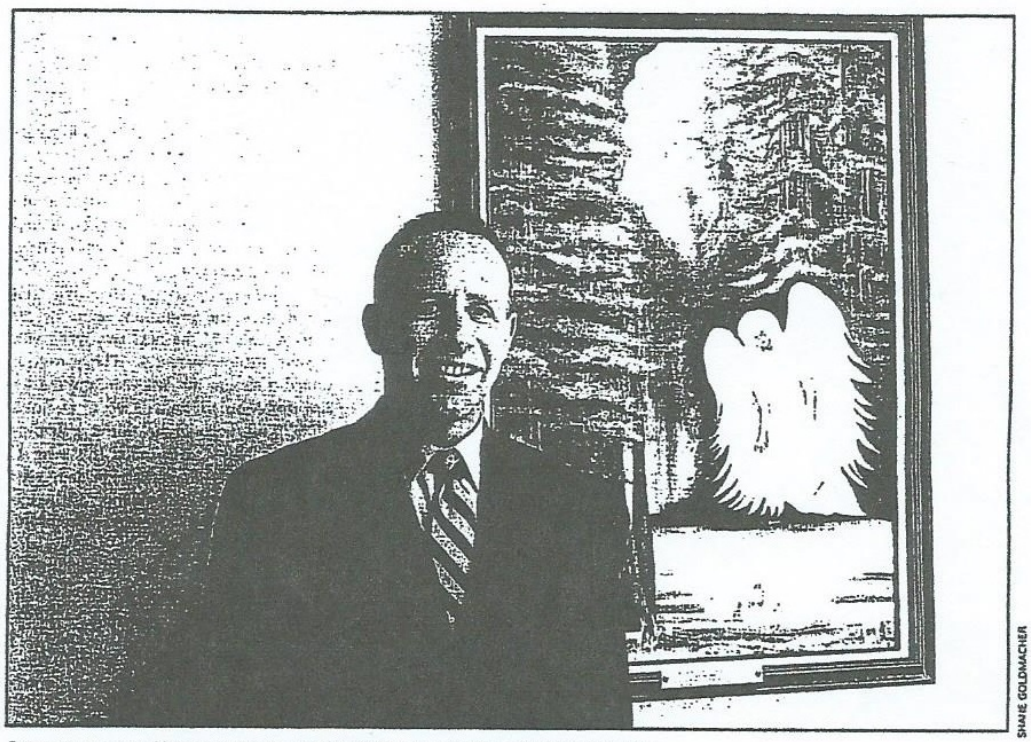
Those hospitals were plagued by scandals ranging from unexplained patient deaths to persistent reports of neglect, abuse, misdiagnosis and over-medication. But when they were closed, little was left in their place. Mental health care activists say the promise of community care has been little more than a cruel hoax on the mentally ill and their families, leaving increasing numbers of homeless mentally ill on the streets or in jail.

Proposition 63 backers hope that community care, at least, will markedly improve with significant money and staffing under the new law. The state Department of Mental Health recently added more than 80 employees specifically to work on improving and expanding community programs under the new law.

Experts say housing is the most urgent need – and the initial funding priority – for the chronically mentally ill (who often avoid shelters), as well as for families of the mentally ill and former foster kids who are kicked out of the foster care system.

"It's very hard to provide services if people don't have stable housing," says Tim Brown, longtime executive director of Sacramento's Loaves & Fishes, which does not accept government funding but has been actively involved in local planning for use of the new money. "But people need a lot of support in housing. It's certainly preferable to their going in and out of jail."

Sigrid Bathen teaches journalism and communications at California State University, Sacramento. She has covered mental health issues for 30 years, winning several California and National Mental Health Association awards--and a Pulitzer nomination--for her mental health coverage in the Sacramento Bee and the California Journal.



SHANE GOLDMACHER

Sacramento attorney and former Assemblyman Darrell Steinberg, who pushed for mental health care reform.