

Editorial: Addicts on the street will only add to costs

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No one would be so shortsighted as to tell recovering alcoholics that they should no longer attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

But in his effort to propose a balanced budget without raising taxes, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger offers a similarly ugly idea, suggesting that California "save" \$53 million by eliminating the subsidy for methadone for heroin addicts.

The Governor's Office, recognizing how wrongheaded the proposal is, makes no effort to defend it. By cutting \$53 million, the state would eliminate \$60 million in matching grants.

More importantly, most of the 35,000 people who are benefiting from the program would be in danger of returning to their old addictions. To feed their habits, many would return to lives of crime, costing society far more.

Democrats blocked the cut last week in budget committees. But the issue remains in play, adding to the strain on those whose lives hang in the balance.

"It scares me to death," Helen Camp, formerly hooked on prescription opiates, told The Bee's Cynthia Hubert last week. "I don't want to go back to where I was before."

The governor's proposed cut to the methadone program ought to be buried, never to reappear. But Democrats who control the Legislature have yet to offer budget proposals that stand a chance of saving such programs.

Assembly Democrats envision borrowing \$9.2 billion in revenue generated by state programs, including beverage recycling. Leaving aside whether such a step is legal, it's irresponsible to patch together yet another budget with massive borrowing.

Senate Democrats are somewhat better, proposing to extend a tax hike approved last year and delay \$2 billion in corporate tax breaks. Such revenue measures won't negate the need to make deep cuts, but perhaps they can save programs whose elimination will only spread costs elsewhere.

In confronting a universe of bad choices, the governor and lawmakers must ask themselves: Which of these will do the most harm?

Putting addicts back on the street would appear to be one answer to that question.

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