

Former drug czar: Eliminating drug treatment clinics would be "a disaster"

By Timm Herdt

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SACRAMENTO — Steve Day of Camarillo is a Vietnam War combat veteran, an ex-con and a recovering heroin addict. He's not had an easy life.

Yet when Day, 59, stepped before a podium in the state Capitol on Wednesday and looked out at the television crews facing him, he was visibly nervous. "Standing in front of these cameras," he said, "is the most difficult thing I've ever done."

Joined by retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey, the former White House drug czar, law enforcement officials and others, Day felt the importance of what he had to say was more powerful than his fear: If the state eliminates Medi-Cal funding for drug treatment, as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed, lives will be lost.

Of most critical concern is the fate of scores of drug-treatment clinics around the state licensed to administer both methadone and counseling to an estimated 35,000 Californians addicted to heroin and other opium-based drugs.

While many recovering drug users, including Day, pay for their daily doses of methadone out of their own pockets, the clinics could not survive without Medi-Cal payments, which account for more than half their revenues.

"We'd have to close," said Stephen Maulhardt of Oxnard, vice president of Aegis Medical Systems, which operates 25 drug-treatment clinics around the state, including four in Ventura County. "If you take 54 percent out of our revenue stream, we start bouncing checks."

Schwarzenegger has proposed elimination of Medi-Cal drug-treatment benefits as part of a massive cut in health and social services programs that he says is necessary to close a \$19.1 billion budget shortfall without raising taxes.

Clinic advocates say such a move would be an economic disaster for the state. It would save \$53 million, but would lose \$85 million in matching federal funds. And, they argue, the act of turning 35,000 recovering opiate addicts loose on the streets would within a year result in an additional \$700 million in costs for jails, courts,

emergency rooms, foster care and other social services that would stem from drug users returning to their addictions.

"Studies prove that most of these individuals will relapse to heroin use," said Jason Kletter, president of a state association of drug-treatment clinics. "The governor's proposal will immediately increase crime and cause chaos in our hospitals."

"From a policy perspective, it's just a disaster," McCaffery said. "We've built slowly an inadequate, but effective treatment capacity. A lot of these institutions are going to start collapsing."

Drug treatment and law enforcement experts say there are two populations that most need methadone treatment: heroin addicts, who are generally older, and a rising number of young people addicted to opiate-based prescription painkillers such as Oxycontin and Vicodin.

McCaffrey said these people live "a life of abject horror," but because of comprehensive treatment programs that include methadone intervention programs "a miracle can occur in greater than 90 percent of the cases."

Success rates are much lower in treatment programs for alcoholism, marijuana use or other street drugs such as methamphetamines.



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