

September 27, 2004

Dear Supervisor:

As the executive director of a national non-profit organization based in Alameda County, I urge your support for the proposal offered by the Alameda County Public Health Department to dedicate at least 25% of the remaining Measure A funds that are not already committed to trauma and emergency medical services toward effective prevention efforts, especially primary prevention. Primary prevention means taking action to build resilience and to prevent problems before they occur. By investing in effective disease and injury prevention efforts, lives will be saved and an inordinate amount of pain, suffering, and costly treatment avoided.

An estimated 50% of all deaths in the U.S. are preventable. While the leading causes of death in the U.S. are heart disease, cancer, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, unintentional injuries, and diabetes, the *actual causes* of these deaths are tobacco, poor diet/lack of exercise, alcohol, infectious agents, pollutants/toxins, firearms, sexual behavior, motor vehicles, and illicit drug use. The vast majority of the actual causes of death is due to lifestyle and environmental factors that are preventable. The leading causes of death in Alameda County mirror that of the country as a whole: diseases of the heart, cancer, stroke, chronic lower respiratory disease, unintentional injury, influenza & pneumonia, and diabetes. Diseases of the heart, cancer, and stroke – all chronic diseases – accounted for 62% of all deaths in the county.

Chronic diseases and injuries are extremely costly in terms of premature lives lost, disability, and diminished quality of life. In addition, because chronic diseases and injuries represent four of the five leading causes of hospitalization at Highland Hospital, they are a huge drain on health care resources. Chronic diseases alone cost the county \$96 million in direct medical costs every year, of which \$26 million is net county cost. These costs will continue to escalate when you consider the exploding rates of diabetes among both children and adults. It is estimated that the number of people with diabetes in California, currently at over two million, will double by the year 2020.

The portion of Measure A dedicated to the Medical Center will surely strengthen its ability to respond to the current state of affairs. However, if we do little or nothing to fundamentally alter the conditions that are draining precious resources from the Medical Center, we will have failed in fulfilling the spirit and promise of Measure A. Available resources will once again prove insufficient to meet the challenge at hand if prevention is not prioritized. Moreover, a concerted focus must be on the county's children and youth population; school-based, comprehensive, obesity, disease, and injury prevention programs that instill healthy habits for a lifetime are essential if we are to turn the tide on these epidemics. It is critical that county leadership make the bold decision to invest available resources in such efforts.

There is a growing body of research that backs up the old adage, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” For example, a recent study conducted for the State of Washington demonstrated that certain prevention and early intervention programs for youth did in fact result in cost savings for taxpayers¹. In another study conducted by the RAND Corporation, the cost effectiveness of the Quantum Opportunities Program, a comprehensive after-school program implemented in four cities, was compared with that of California’s “Three Strikes” law. It concluded that, per dollar spent, the after-school program was over five times more cost-effective at preventing serious crimes than “Three Strikes.” The benefits of investing in prevention accrue not only to those agencies and departments directly involved in delivering health and medical services but to the entire community, most especially police and other public safety departments, as well as the businesses that are increasingly vested in having a healthy and safe workforce.

Prevention Institute is a national non-profit center dedicated to improving community health and well-being by building momentum for effective primary prevention. Since 1997, Prevention Institute has provided training, technical assistance, research, and evaluation for coalitions, community-based organizations, government agencies, foundations, and others. Prevention Institute is currently developing an Alameda County Violence Prevention Blueprint.

Measure A represents an unprecedented opportunity for Alameda County residents to create a system that not only ensures access to medical care and treatment for those who need it but also truly promotes the health and well-being of all residents. My staff and I would be pleased to share additional information and resources to the Board of Supervisors as you deliberate on how to get the most out of the opportunity created by Measure A. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Larry Cohen
Executive Director

¹ S. Aos, R. Lieb, J. Mayfield, M. Miller, A Pennucci. Benefits and Costs of Prevention and Early Intervention Programs for Youth. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy. July 12, 2004. Available at <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/rptfiles/04-07-3901.pdf>