

Message from the Chairman

During a tough financial time, Johnson County's budget for fiscal year 2010 has become a lifeboat for aging programs caught in the choppy waters of state funding cutbacks.

Getting to that point wasn't easy.

The county's FY 2010 budget process involved making some difficult decisions while holding the county's property tax at its current rate (the lowest tax of 105 counties in Kansas).

We encountered many funding challenges because of the state's struggle to pass a balanced budget with dwindling revenues. To balance its ledgers, the state reduced funding in the Senior Care Act. That resulted in the loss of \$108,093 in state funding to the Johnson County Area Agency on Aging. Johnson County Government made up that lost revenue in its FY 2010 budget, which was approved last month.

Through Senior Care Act programs, the AAA provides vital services to the county's senior adults. Services include geriatric care management; personal care attendants; and homemaker, respite, and chore services, such as home cleaning, yard cleanup, and arduous tasks; and a lifeline medical alert system. The Senior Care Act also allows the county to purchase medical equipment for clients.

If we had not filled the gap from the state reduction in Senior Care Act funding, the AAA could have faced service reductions or limitations and, in a worst-case scenario, the implementation of a waiting list for new Senior Care Act clients.

The county also accepted funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to help plug state funding holes in other services available to our aging population, including nutrition and weatherization programs.

The stimulus funding included \$100,531, with a county match of \$17,284, for a total authorization of \$117,815 to support existing nutrition services of the AAA. Those nutrition services include:

- Providing noon meals at eight local neighborhood centers;
- Delivering meals to homebound residents through the county's Meals on Wheels program; and
- Supporting the Choosing Healthy Appetizing Meal Plan Solutions for Seniors (CHAMPSS) program, a nontraditional senior dining option at select local grocery stores.

The federal funding will help the AAA provide meals to seniors in need of food, avert the curtailing of nutrition services and staff due to state funding cutbacks, and alleviate the possibility of having to establish a waiting list for services.

Johnson County also received \$1,899,000 in ARRA weatherization funding to help elderly and low-income residents make their homes more comfortable, safe, and energy efficient. Services include furnace inspection, air leakage sealing, and installation of insulation.

More information on AAA and weatherization services is available through Johnson County Human Services at 913-715-8800.

The Board of County Commissioners supports seniors through vital programs and services that have been stretched to the limit due to stagnant funding over the past few years, even though new clients are seeking assistance in ever-increasing numbers. Johnson County's elder population is increasing as people continue to move into our great community and as baby boomers retire. Advances in medicine also have increased life expectancy.

As a board, we are aware that adequate funding of services and programs for our senior population saves taxpayer money in the long term.

Statistics show that the longer people can live in their own homes or in the homes of friends and family, maintaining as much independence as possible, the less society has to spend on their care. According to the U.S. Administration on Aging, the cost of one *year* of home-delivered meals to a client often equals the cost of one *day* in a hospital.

The funding crisis is far from over. The federal stimulus funding is primarily a stopgap measure until adequate funding of these programs is achieved. But the ink on the state's 2010 budget still isn't dry, and recent monthly reports of continued revenue shortfalls leave Gov. Mark Parkinson and legislators with questions about where to cut and how much.

Obviously, a case can be made for all the services and programs subject to state funding reductions. But the programs that serve the neediest and most vulnerable residents should be given priority and a reprieve from further funding reductions.

It's true that the economic downturn we are experiencing affects everyone. But seniors and households in need are *most* affected. When the government safety net is removed through budget cuts, they are often left with nowhere else to turn.

The Board of County Commissioners has always had a policy of doing everything it can to keep seniors in their homes, and has continually approved funding to support that policy.

We must remember what Vice President Hubert Humphrey said many years ago: "...the moral test of government is how the government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped."

By helping our senior citizens enjoy their "golden years," we set the stage for our future as we grow older.

In short, by helping others we are truly helping ourselves as a community of choice at all levels of government. Let's pass the moral test together.

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