Further shredding of safety net hurts real people

By Alex Sanchez, Jeff Smith and Patricia Gardner

While we are relieved that Congress and the White House finally put an end to this government shutdown, the across-the-board spending cuts to domestic programs known as sequestration are continuing to slam Santa Clara County's low-income families, children, seniors, veterans, persons with disabilities and the formerly homeless.

These are people who rely on federally funded services that help them move toward self-sufficiency by providing subsidies for basic necessities like housing and food. Congress has got to stop manufacturing crisis after crisis and realize the damage that underfunding and sequestration have had to our safety net.

The best example is housing. About 17,000 low-income households in Santa Clara County depend on federal Section 8 rental housing assistance. More than 10,000 of these families are led by single moms who work but can't make enough to pay all the bills, while about 8,000 are elderly and/or disabled. Their average annual income is about $16,000, only 15.5 percent of the county's median income.

Because Congress reduced the 2013 Section 8 program funding (the first year of sequestration), these families are having to pay more toward their rent, in some cases by several hundred dollars a month. This means a typical disabled senior who receives subsidized housing and lives on $1,100 a month in Social Security benefits and maybe some small savings now has to choose between food, medicine and utilities after paying the increased rent.

Recognizing that many families could be evicted if unable to pay this additional rent, Santa Clara County, the Housing Authority, San Jose, Santa Clara and Sunnyvale last month pooled $1.82 million in emergency funding to prevent the eviction of up to 500 households most severely impacted by federal cuts.

While local governments are preventing outright evictions through emergency funds, on Nov. 1 another crisis will hit, this time in the food stamp program. About 90,000 people in Santa Clara County — almost half of them children — rely on food stamps distributed monthly through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (known as CalFresh in California). The county provides $16.5 million per month in food stamps. While that program remained intact during this government shutdown, recipients will see their benefits decrease after Friday, when the extra funding provided by the 2009 American Recovery Act, the economic stimulus package, expires.

Add to that the second round of 10-year sequestration cuts starting in January. The continuing cuts will further erode Santa Clara County's ability to provide housing subsidies to more than 17,000 families, while 25,000 other families are on the Section 8 waiting list. We know the second year of sequestration will worsen the impacts that we already have experienced from the first round; as the federal reduction of funding for domestic programs continues, Congress is forcing us to help fewer needy families, and for those we can help, it will not be enough to sustain the most basic needs.

In Silicon Valley, the next version of a product usually is an improvement over the first. Sequester version 2.0 will add to the misery of a significant number of residents. This is no way to run social services. The next time national leaders consider shutdowns or budget cuts, we ask them to remember that their actions have real-world impact. Their irresponsible actions create a tremendous burden on local governments and nonprofits as we try to keep the needy and vulnerable from falling through the safety net.

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