

**Support for Sanity:** Supervisor

Zoe Lofgren does for mental health

what colleague Rod Diridon does

for transportation.



*Santa Clara County spends more on mental health services*

# Mental

*than any county except San Francisco. But local programs*

# Breakdown

*are still hurting from years of Deukmejian-era cuts.*

**BY HAL PLOTKIN**

**T**he doctors at San Jose's Alexian Brothers Hospital thought Shelley, a slow learner from Palo Alto, was mentally ill. So they had her newborn daughter, Brenda, taken away. Last November, police were called to the home of Joel Limberg's mother, who needed help getting her son to a psychiatric hospital. When the mentally ill 42-year-old assaulted police with a knife, they shot him dead. In August, a distraught and troubled young Mountain View man threatened suicide. When the SWAT team was called in, the young man made good on his threat.

Call it SWAT Therapy. A few years ago, the outcome of each of these cases might have been different. Skilled mental health workers once helped mothers like Shelley through their pregnancies. A local mobile mental health intervention unit, closed down early in the Deukmejian administration, used to offer the mentally ill a helping hand before the terrifying long arm of the law arrived. But that was then. And this is now. A.D. After Deukmejian.

As thousands of mentally disturbed people roam the streets, the public continues to clamor for

more police, more jails and more protection. Mental health budgets, on the other hand, continue to be slashed. So when a mentally ill person needs immediate help, don't expect a psychiatrist, a nurse or even a trained social worker to show up. In California, in 1990, we've chosen to sic the police on the mentally ill. Treat them with handcuffs, medicate them with physical restraints, offer them a night or two in jail. Law and order. That'll show 'em.

Across California, this tale of twisted priorities, mangled lives and troubled street people has

become the New Age horror story. After decades of officially sanctioned neglect, California's mental health system has become, in the words of one expert, "more disordered than the people who are being treated."

It wasn't supposed to happen that way. Back in 1957, California adopted its first Community Mental Health Act. The move was a response to public indignation over the conditions prevalent in many state mental hospitals. A critically acclaimed CBS-TV documentary, broadcast earlier that year, focused

attention on these once-grisly "snake pit" institutions; patients were pictured chained to beds, shivering in their own excrement and moaning in muted hysteria.

An outraged public demanded the "snake pits" be closed. At about the same time, new anti-psychotic drugs offered hope that most of the mentally ill could be treated as outpatients in community treatment centers. But the drugs, though useful, turned out to be a false panacea. And there was one other major problem: little or no money was allocated to fund the promised community treatment facilities.

So, one by one, the state's mentally ill, many of whom had been institutionalized for years, found themselves dumped on the streets, often with little more than a bus ticket and a referral to a local jurisdiction that hadn't the slightest idea what to do with them.

"No one intended to put these people in the gutter," says Santa Clara County Supervisor Zoe Lofgren, a longtime advocate for mental health programs. "It's just that these are not powerful people, they're not political," she says.

The government, Lofgren says,

discriminates against the mentally ill: "What if we said only two out of ten old people could go into a nursing home, or that only one of five diabetics could have insulin, and that the rest should go into the dumpster? We'd all be voted out of office at once."

"It's catastrophic," says San Jose Assemblyman John Vasconcellos, noting that state funding of mental health programs has actually declined by more than a quarter of a billion dollars, measured per capita, since George Deukmejian took office. "At a time of increasing need we have diminishing resources," Vasconcellos says.

The burly legislator reports he was recently moved to tears by the desperate situation. In an open letter he penned to Governor Deukmejian during the latest budget skirmish, Vasconcellos wrote that he started to cry while driving to his apartment near the Capitol. "What kind of person are you, George Deukmejian?" he wrote again and again in his open letter, imploring the governor to meet with some of those affected by his proposed budget cuts. "How he can inflict such pain on people and still sleep at night, I just don't know," Vasconcellos says.