

# Q&A with state social services chief Diana Dooley

Agency leader Dooley sees years of lean times for state's safety net.

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By Barbara Anderson / The Fresno Bee

Since taking the reins of the state's Health and Human Services Agency this year, Hanford native Diana Dooley has had to slash billions from health and welfare programs and brace for health reform, which will add 3 million to 4 million Californians to insurance rolls.

On Thursday, before attending a reception in her honor at Arte Américas, Dooley talked about the recent program cuts at her agency and a revised state budget Gov. Jerry Brown is expected to release today that could include more cuts.

The measures the governor signed in March address an estimated \$11.2 billion of California's \$26.6 billion deficit. The cuts included restrictions to Medi-Cal services and smaller welfare grants.

Dooley said the reductions to Medi-Cal, the state's insurance program for the poor, and cuts to welfare-to-work programs will be difficult to implement.

"I feel a sense of responsibility and obligation to the people who are reliant on the government services," she said. "But California is at the point where we can't do more with less. We are doing less with less."

Here are some of Dooley's thoughts on the program cuts and health reform.

**Question:** Will Gov. Brown's revised budget reinstate any health and welfare programs?

**Answer:** "Nothing will be reinstated. The revenues are a little bit better, but not significant enough. We still need a longer-term window to stabilize the budget."

**Q:** Will there be more cuts in the revised budget?

**A:** "There may be. I can't talk about specifics. But there's nothing we haven't seen before in terms of the fundamental approach to reductions."

**Q:** When will the state be able to restore program cuts?

**A:** "We are treating this as a permanent reset of these programs for the foreseeable future, for as many as five years. We're not going to have discretionary spending for the foreseeable future."

**Q:** How are the cuts already enacted affecting the Health and Human Services Agency?

**A:** "We have a hiring freeze and vacancy rates throughout the agency. The vacancy rates are 17% to 18% to as high as 25% vacancy rates in the departments."

**Q:** What are some of the changes Californians will experience this summer from program cuts, most of which begin July 1?

**A:** "People in the welfare-to-work CalWORKS program will have their eligibility limit reduced from five years to four years. The adult-day health care benefit will be eliminated. And it will be harder for people to get in-home supportive services."

**Q:** Is there a cut that bothers you more than others?

**A:** "We will reduce the SSI and SSP [supplemental Social Security payments for low-income seniors and disabled] to the federal minimum. It will be a \$15-a-month cut. It is the difference between \$845 a month to \$830. They will be living with \$15 less a month."

"These are people who have nowhere to turn. I think that's the part that's the most difficult."

**Q:** The state is asking for a 10% cut in Medi-Cal payments to doctors and other providers. In the past, doctors have been successful at stopping this. What chance does the proposed cut have this year?

**A:** "I think we'll get some of the reduction but I can't say for certain."

**Q:** Do you have any special concerns about how the health and welfare cuts will hurt the Valley? A higher percentage of people here than the state average rely on Medi-Cal and other social programs.

**A:** "We want to dig out of this hole as quickly as possible to give relief to people who need it the most."

**Q:** What would you like to see happen?

**A:** "One of the saddest parts of this to me has been leaders in the areas of greatest need are sometimes the most reluctant to move forward on a tax-extension plan."

"We need the legislative leaders to step up and help solve the problems for the Valley."

**Q:** What effect will health reform have on the state as millions are added to the Medi-Cal rolls beginning in 2014?

**A:** "Until 2019, the federal government is paying for most of the newly eligible. But I have told [U.S. Health and Human Services] Secretary Kathleen Sebelius that while we're committed to health-care reform, we can't do it without a fundamental stability in our state budget. And they need to recognize they have to help us in order for us to make health-care reform work."