

## California's Budget Crisis: Whither Black Leaders?

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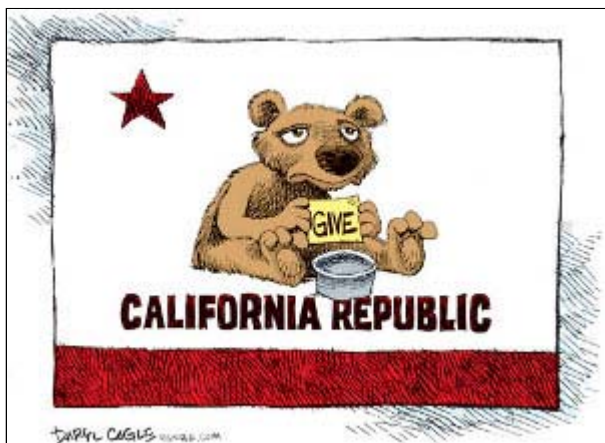
By **F. Finley McRae**

California, once America's gold standard of economic opportunity, now belongs to that pack of states gripped most tightly in gargantuan and dangerous budget crises

A flock of public policy experts predict that blacks, Latinos, the elderly and the poor will feel the cuts' effects far more deeply and visibly than other groups, not only in the once "Golden State," but in Illinois, Texas and New Jersey, among other states struggling most. Illinois Governor Pat Quinn has ordered a 66-percent sales tax increase to help solve his dilemma, while Rick Perry, the ultra-conservative Texas chief executive, insists that public education must be offered up as the sacrifice to the Lone Star State's fiscal crisis.

In California, one day after Governor Jerry Brown touted his plan to close the state's \$28 billion budget gap, the Legislative Black Caucus expressed its concern in a carefully-worded statement. "We must be careful," it said, "not to balance the budget on the backs of our most vulnerable citizens; children, disabled, the poor and elderly."

[In his January 10 address, the governor had proposed a whopping \\$12.5 billion in spending cuts to bring the budget into balance](#) <sup>[1]</sup>. Brown said he won't touch K-12 funding or prison appropriations, but all other state programs could be on the chopping block.



<sup>[2]</sup>To avoid those cuts, Brown has declared, California voters must approve a ballot initiative authorizing a tax increase to raise enough revenue to offset severe budget cuts that would decimate critical, safety-net programs. The initiative is scheduled to go before Californians in June.

Meanwhile, progressive policy experts, African Americans and other people of color are just beginning to discuss what they should do to persuade a majority of California's electorate to approve the measure.

If the ballot initiative fails, the state's poorest and most vulnerable citizens will surely bear the brunt of what many program directors and activists describe as draconian cuts in health and human services.

The Caucus's delicately worded message perhaps signaled a heightened level of advocacy to prevent the enormous social and economic consequences such cuts would surely spawn.

Both chambers of the state legislature, the senate and assembly, are scheduled to vote on the budget before July 1, after the initiative's results are declared official in June.

Until then, the next four months will offer a window of opportunity for influential African-American clergy,

community activists, and business and professional groups, to organize into a solid coalition to oppose the cuts, or at least substantially reduce them. So far, however, few if any, African American leaders have moved to organize a lobbying network, or even spoken publicly about the matter.

In another ominous fiscal move, Brown, a shrewd political chess master on his second tour of duty in the Governor's Office, said he would hand off responsibility for many health and human services programs to California's city and county government.

The Black Caucus responded by declaring that "with unemployment in the double digits and a substantial decline in tax revenues, we are witnessing the dismantling of our state's safety net and the erosion of programs that impact our municipalities, school districts, colleges and universities." The legislators also charged that if Brown's likely significant cuts to higher education were enacted, they "would undoubtedly limit access for students seeking entrance into our colleges and universities. For communities of color, this would be devastating and further reduce enrollment that is already at its lowest rate in years."

Equally worrisome for the poor, the Caucus noted, is that Brown's budget would slash cash assistance and eliminate more than half of the funding for the social service program CalWORKS by cutting \$1.5 billion in state and federal funding, reducing monthly grants by 13 percent and rolling back the number of enrolled families by more than 120,000—from a projected 580,000 to 458,000.

Cal WORKS enables mothers (many of whom are students) to pay for child care they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford. Without that sustenance, many, if not most of them, will stumble backwards, into long welfare lines. Others may never return to school and complete diploma and degree requirements. As a result, thousands would forever be shut out of the possibility of meaningful employment.

In addition, the governor's budget snatches another \$1.7 billion from Medi-Cal funding, capping benefits for prescription drugs at a measly six each month and prevents the sick from seeing their physicians for more than 10 times a year. It would also slice In-Home Supportive Services to the bone, by \$486 million, thus reducing hours for caregivers and eliminating some services. More than 450,000 low-income disabled residents would be affected.



[3]And the state's child-care programs for low-income families would be partially dismantled, because assistance for 11 and 12-year-olds would be discontinued, except for children served through the State Pre-school Program. Finally, recipients depending on SSI/SSP would have their checks trimmed to the bare minimum, \$830 monthly. instead of the current \$845.3

Four days after Brown unveiled his budget, Alice Huffman, the NAACP's California State Conference president, widely respected as a wily field general, looked over the political landscape and offered a prediction about the battles she believes will commence before the legislature passes the final version of the budget this summer.

"Its a little bit fluid now, cuts will be made and programs will be consolidated," she said. But the NAACP wants to be strategic in our response. For the first time in years, we have a governor who is serious about raising revenues, not just cutting spending, so we have to be responsible and supportive of his plan to do that."

Huffman stressed, though, that this support should not be interpreted as a sign that "we're agreeing to roll over, if there's something that would be so egregious that we couldn't live with it, then we might have to go to the mat to protect our community's interests."

Nonetheless, she said, "We're trying to walk that fine line to protect whatever we must protect, all the while knowing the governor has to close the budget gap and raise more revenue to do it. We may have to take some short term pain. But we have to ensure that we'll be players at the table."

Before the budget is cut and dried, Huffman said, "we've got to wait for the revenue revisions, they're (elected officials) just dancing now. This won't be serious until we know how much revenue the state will have. Until then, this is all just a dance."

When the dance is over, Huffman said, more than 150 NAACP members and officials will go to Sacramento, the state capital, and lobby state legislators. But California's African Americans, she lamented, "don't have enough pressure groups and the few we have aren't coordinated."

For Lydia Missaelides, executive director of the state's \$177 million Adult Day Health Care Program, which includes 300 senior centers, Brown's proposal to completely eliminate them would be a lethal blow. "Frail, low income, seniors of color would be hit hardest; they suffer from debilitating, chronic conditions in greater numbers than the population as a whole." Pointing out that "these same low income seniors are served in the medical adult day care settings, which are far less costly for tax payers than overcrowded emergency rooms and hospitals, she said senior health programs were hard hit in past budgets, and, unfortunately, this one is no different."

Dr. Frank Gilliam, dean of the School of Public Policy at the University of California at Los Angeles, predicted that "elected officials representing blacks and Latinos are going to have an uphill battle "because these cuts are aimed at reducing services and programs primarily serving low income and poor people." Gilliam, who is African-American, said leaders of color must take their message across class lines to drive home the impact of massive cuts. They must make middle-class voters "understand they have more in common with poor youth than they realize. If low-income youth are not adequately trained and educated to participate in the workforce, who is going to pay taxes that fund the programs today's boomers will require in their old age?"

The Rt. Rev. George Dallas McKinney, a bishop of the Church of God In Christ, who is the presiding prelate of the denomination's 2nd Southern California Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction, asked rhetorically, "Are we going to wait until we all go down before we address the problem?"

It is puzzling, the bishop continued, "that as this state is able to constantly build prisons to incarcerate people for psychological and legal reasons and the nation is willing to stretch resources to maintain military bases all around the world, our infrastructure is becoming more and more bankrupt. If the nation does not follow God's commandment on behalf of the poor, the least and the lost," he closed, "then it is not only sinning, but foreclosing on its future."

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[1] In his January 10 address, the governor had proposed a whopping \$12.5 billion in spending cuts to bring the budget into balance: <http://www.latimes.com/news/la-me-0111-government-power-m,0,6776772.story>

[2] Image: <http://www.thedefendersonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/California-Republic-flag-4.jpg>

[3] Image: <http://www.thedefendersonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Jerry-Brown.jpg>

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