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State's health, social services need efficiency

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AUSTIN — Once again fiscal discipline is proving to be the best kind of compassion.

Assume for a moment our neighbor is an alcoholic, with a history of mental illness and unable to afford health insurance for his children. Right now, there are at least three separate state agencies — each with a myriad of bureaucracies and regulations — he must contact before taking advantage of state assistance. That is three screening processes, three case workers, three sets of administrative oversight.

What a waste.

And more than likely, his problems never go away because no one connects the dots.

People of good will can debate whether the state should offer such programs in the first place, but the fact remains these programs exist. Not only do they exist, but they are among the largest drivers of the state's budget.

In fact, spending on health and human services will quickly surpass education as the state's top expenditure. Currently, there are at least a dozen health and human services agencies in Texas administering more than 200 programs at a cost of some \$20 billion a year.

Over the years, as new programs aimed at meeting particular health and social needs have arisen, agencies were created with little regard for fundamental issues of fiscal restraint and operational efficiency. With each new program and agency, came a new — and duplicative — layer of administrative bureaucracy. And because each represented the political fiefdom of champions in the Legislature and bureaucracy, they were operated in a vacuum.

Not only did this create massive inefficiencies for the taxpayer, but also needless hassles for the individuals seeking aid. Texas taxpayers were footing the bill for what were needlessly duplicative administrative functions, while the state's neediest citizens had to waste countless hours filling out essentially the same forms for each agency and program that processed them in almost identical — though distinctly separate — ways. Not surprisingly, costs have spiraled out of control.

All that is changing. Earlier this year, the Legislature ordered the consolidation of 11 such entities into four. For the taxpayer, that means a better bang for the buck. The planning phase of the consolidation has already resulted in a reported \$24 million savings. Even with a combined budget in the billions, that is significant — and the real consolidation hasn't even begun. The estimated cost savings to the taxpayer, once consolidation is complete, is projected at \$1-billion dollars.

These agencies are finding what businessmen have long known: very often, much more can be accomplished with less.

Perhaps more important to our neighbor will be the improved quality of services he receives from the state. No longer will he drown in a sea of duplicative paperwork, lost in the shuffle between multiple agencies. His needs will be assessed holistically, increasing the odds that as his alcohol addiction is treated in the context of his mental illness, he will more quickly find employment that allows him to provide for his family's needs.

Even while we argue the true value of these programs, we must never question the importance of strict fiscal accountability and tightly-controlled administration. In every case, demanding greater efficiency of state agencies results not only in lower costs to the taxpayer, but also better services for all Texans.

Guest columnist Michael Quinn Sullivan is vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation.