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**BODY:**

GIVEN the constant drumbeat in the media about ``cutbacks'' in county governments, the average Californian could be forgiven for thinking that county governments throughout the state are near broke and are under acute financial pressure. But citizens need to understand that there is a big difference between the whining and the reality.

An analysis of county payroll expenditures in California indicates that county employees have done very well, indeed, over the past several years. In 1997, the total payroll for county government employees in California was approximately \$12.1 billion. By 2002, that number had shot up to \$17.9 billion, an increase of almost 48 percent.

Of course, California's population increased during this same period, but not nearly as rapidly as county payroll expenditures. In 1997, California citizens were paying \$381.65 per capita to finance county payrolls. By 2002, each citizen was chipping in \$523.15, a change of over 37 percent. This means that the average family of four in California paid almost \$2,100 out of its own pocketbook to cover salaries (not including benefits) for county employees.

In this post 9-11 world, most Californians might think that public safety is the highest priority of their elected county supervisors. They'd be wrong. Total payroll expenditures for county police functions (i.e., sheriff's departments) statewide increased from approximately \$1.74 billion in 1997 to a little over \$1.94 billion in 2002, an increase of slightly over 12 percent. This 12 percent increase, while substantial, pales in comparison to increases for welfare system payrolls, judicial and legal payrolls and health system payrolls.

Payroll expenditure for welfare system employees increased from approximately \$1.58 billion in 1997 to approximately \$2.72 billion in 2002, an increase of over 72 percent. It is interesting to note that the total number of welfare recipients in California actually declined from approximately 2.48 million in January of 1997 to approximately 1.1 million in December of 2003. The total number of county welfare system employees in 1997 was 46,681 and this number grew to 63,716 such employees in 2002.

While it is true that many of the people formerly on welfare who are now working are still receiving Medi-Cal health insurance benefits and other services, the increase in payroll costs for welfare employees is staggering and needs explanation.

The blame for this exponential growth in welfare payrolls does not lie exclusively with county governments. The Legislature has, over the past 15 years or so, developed an increasingly arcane and perverse incentive system that encourages counties to expand their welfare systems. These perverse incentives have been conjured up by an increasingly partisan, left-wing legislative majority. Republican legislators who either did not comprehend or did not object to these perverse incentives can also share the blame for this sorry mess.

In any case, local officials should be freed to reallocate resources in a manner that better reflects their constituents' priorities. In short, the welfare swamp in Sacramento needs to be drained.

Growth in county judicial and legal payrolls has also been spectacular. In 1997, the cost of such payrolls was about \$1.58 billion statewide. By 2002, it had grown to approximately \$2.67 billion, or more than 68 percent. Similarly large increases were recorded in county health system payrolls, which increased from approximately \$1.13 billion in 1997 to almost \$1.89 billion in 2002, an increase of over 67 percent. Payroll increases in county financial administration statewide were approximately 45 percent during the same period, and payrolls for general government administration were up almost 41 percent during the same time frame.

In 50 counties, citizen payroll expenditures per capita for welfare system employees increased faster than citizen personal income in those counties. In 48 counties, citizen payroll expenditures per capita for health care system employees increased faster than citizen personal income per capita in those counties. In sum, citizen payroll expenditures per capita for county employees increased much faster than citizen personal income per capita between 1997 and 2002.

There is a group of Californians under financial pressure all right, but it is not the county employees; it's the beleaguered taxpayers.

**NOTES:** Jon Coupal is an attorney and president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association. Steven Frates is president of the Center for Government Analysis and a senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College.

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