The **Daily News** of Los Angeles

December 2, 2004 Thursday
VALLEY EDITION

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. N4

LENGTH: 585 words

HEADLINE: COUNTIES SKIMP ON DEPUTY HIRES, REPORT CONTENDS

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BODY:

California counties massively increased spending for health, welfare and legal-system employees' salaries while stiffing sheriff's deputies and other public safety workers from 1997 to 2002, according to a report released Wednesday.

At the same time, the number of welfare recipients in the state dropped from 2.6 million to 1.1 million while the number of welfare workers increased 36 percent and their salary costs shot up 72 percent. Health and judicial workers' payrolls soared nearly 70 percent.

But in the same five-year period, the payrolls for sheriff's deputies rose just 19 percent and the number of deputies per 1,000 people dropped 5 percent.

``It's clear that counties are not spending wisely,'' said Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, which commissioned the report. ``And when you have a major program like general welfare caseloads decreasing and yet payrolls going up there is something really broken with the system.

``It is no longer sufficient for taxpayer groups to just sit and bang on the table and say, 'No new taxes.' Now we have to come out and say 'No new taxes because you are not spending the money you have wisely.'

``We are trying to educate people as to where the money is really going. It's not the lack of revenues, but the misdirection of revenues.''

Law enforcement officials said the problem has resulted in underfunded and understaffed sheriff and police departments throughout the state.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca and Police Chief William Bratton asked voters Nov. 2 for a sales tax increase to pay for 5,000 more officers and deputies. The measure failed.

``When members of the public voted down Measure A, it was a vote of no confidence in the Board of Supervisors,'' said John Rees, executive director of the Association for Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs. ``The public has not been getting the deal they were told they were getting.

``County supervisors up and down the state have made funding decisions that do not prioritize public safety.

It's been about astronomical increases in health and welfare payrolls.''

The 147-page report, written by Steve B. Frates, president of the Center for Government Analysis and a senior fellow at the Rose Institute for State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, analyzed payroll and employment statistics in 57 counties, excluding the city-county of San Francisco.

Statewide, total payroll expenditures for county government increased from $12.1 billion in 1997 to $17.9 billion in 2002, a 48 percent increase which exceeded the 24 percent increase in per capita income in the state. During the period, the number of county employees per 1,000 citizens rose 7 percent.

``That means the average family of four in California pays nearly $2,100 a year for the salaries of county employees,'' Frates said.

The study found similar phenomena in Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Ventura counties, along with most other counties.

In Los Angeles County, the number of welfare recipients dropped 40 percent while payroll costs for welfare workers rose 66 percent.

But Phil Ansell, assistant director for programs and policy at the Department of Public Social Services, said that despite the drop in caseloads from the welfare-to-work program, the department increased its staffing 25 percent to serve a rise in the total number of people served from 1.7 to 2 million, mainly involving those seeking Medi-Cal health benefits and in-home health services.

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LOAD-DATE: December 2, 2004

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