

EDITORIAL: Find better ways to help mentally ill people

By The Bee Editorial Board

Government too often avoids its responsibilities to severely mentally ill people.

The latest example is the reaction to Assembly Bill 1006, which would expand treatment for criminals who are mentally ill, and sent to prison or jail.

The legislation by Assembly Member Marc Levine, a Marin County Democrat, says that once a defendant has been convicted of a crime, the person's attorney or the prosecutor could present evidence that the individual is mentally ill. If the judge agrees, the person would receive treatment in state prison or county jail, or perhaps a mental health treatment facility, depending on the seriousness of the offense.

Levine's bill would be in addition to county mental health courts and focus on defendants sentenced to time in jail or prison. The idea for AB 1006 comes from former Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg. The point of the bill is to reduce criminalization of mental illness, an admirable goal, Steinberg says.

Noting that most criminals will be released from jail or prison, Steinberg and Levine say government would save money by providing care for mentally ill criminals before they're released.

However, cost savings are theoretical. There would be up-front costs. Gov. Jerry Brown's Department of Finance opposes the bill, which is bottled up in the Assembly Appropriations Committee, saying it "would result in significant general fund costs."

Corrections officials say the bill would duplicate work already done by prison staff and add to the cost of prisons. Such concerns ought to be addressed.

Californians approved Proposition 63 in 2004. It was promoted by Steinberg and it generates \$1 billion-plus each year to pay for mental health care by imposing an extra 1% income tax on people who earn \$1 million or more annually.

The idea behind the measure was noble, but Proposition 63 has been riddled with unintended consequences.

You might remember that some of the funding was spent — some would say "wasted" — on things such as acupuncture, art and drama classes, sweat lodges, parenting classes, massage chairs, horseback riding therapy, yoga and anti-bullying programs.

In addition, Proposition 63 bars the use of that money for court-related services, even for mentally ill people who commit petty crimes.

That restriction should be lifted. There is no good reason to deny Proposition 63 funds for people with mental illness, simply because they have committed minor crimes.

AB 1006 could be refined. But few statewide issues are more pressing than the criminalization of mental illness. For that reason alone, the Appropriations Committee should allow the bill to go to an Assembly floor vote, and be reviewed in the Senate.