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# Bill Campbell: Kids commission knows value of a buck

Tobacco-tax money does more good by staying under local control

By **BILL CAMPBELL**  
ORANGE COUNTY SUPERVISOR

**Editorial director's note:** We've always argued that the tobacco tax sponsored by movie director Rob Reiner to fund services for children ages 5 and under was a bad idea. But, since the money is, in fact, being taken from smokers, we find it a slightly lesser evil to keep the funds under local control rather than going toward state health care program.

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"No good deed goes unpunished" is a sentiment that aptly captures the situation facing the Children and Families Commission of Orange County. Despite being praised as a model of sound fiscal management and efficiency, there is a move afoot by Sacramento-area state Sen. Dave Cox to gut the O.C. Children and Families Commission and similar commissions in other counties by seizing their funds and using them to expand one of our deficit-ridden state government's entitlement programs.

The O.C. Children and Families Commission was created in 1999, following the passage of Proposition 10, which imposed a 50-cent tax on packages of tobacco products. The revenue funds early development programs for children in the first five years of life. Eighty percent of the money goes to a locally appointed commission in each county – called "First 5" or Children and Families Commissions – with 20 percent going to the state First 5 Commission.

Since Prop. 10 revenue is allocated based on county birthrates, the O.C. Children and Families Commission receives the second-highest percentage – about the only instance in state programs in which Orange County is not a donor county.

As a county supervisor, I represent the county on the Children and Families Commission. Having served in both the state Legislature and in local government, I can say unequivocally that if state government emulated the prudent, sensible and farsighted operations and budgeting practices of the Children and Families Commission, there would be no state budget crisis.

State government spends tax dollars as if revenue will never drop, a recklessness that fuels chronic budget deficits. Conversely, the O.C. Children and Families Commission operates with the understanding that Prop. 10 revenue is in decline, and responds by ensuring the solvency of services with multiyear allocations – while requiring grantees to provide quantifiable evidence of success or else lose their funding.

State government continues adding to its payroll, while our commission contracts out as many functions as possible so more dollars go toward funding services rather than bureaucracy.

A panoply of health and education services are made possible by commission grants, such as the Healthy Smiles dental program; Mercy House and Casa Teresa residential programs, where homeless expectant mothers can have their babies and learn important life and work skills to provide for their children; visiting pediatric nurse services; and school nurses and school readiness coordinators in Orange County's school districts.

At the same time, instead of preaching to parents about how to raise their children, the commission provides them with the best information possible and trusts parents to make the best decisions.

The Orange County grand jury – which is notoriously critical of government operations – has commended the commission for its fiscal management and programs.

The commission also asked the Bridgespan Group, a nationally renowned nonprofit consulting firm, for a performance audit. The commission passed with flying colors and is implementing Bridgespan's strategies to help further its efficiency and effectiveness.

Taxpayers should cast a critical eye on the idea of abolishing such county Children and Families commissions, which are locally accountable and manage their budgets responsibly, in order to give the money to a state government that is far less accountable and demonstrates a near-total inability to manage itself.

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