

## **Ken on the Issues: PUBLIC SAFETY**

Making the best use of the limited funds available for public safety is always a challenge. One key to meeting this challenge is through creative programs that efficiently use funds and make use of effective partnerships.

Emergency preparedness is one area where this type of thinking has been useful. Disaster can strike any time. Effective communication to the people impacted can help save lives and property. During the 2007 wildfires in Southern California, San Diego County had a public notification system in place that was critical to the successful evacuation of people and saving many lives during that disaster. Later that year, I asked our County to look into creating a public notification or reverse-911 system that would alert residents in the case of an emergency.

Last year, the first phase of our system, called AlertSCC, came online. If natural disaster or terrorist attack occurs in the County, the system will send an automated message to land lines, cell phones, email addresses, and other communications devices giving residents information and instructions about the emergency. Land lines were included in the initial roll-out of the system; cell phones, email addresses and other ways to reach residents are now being added to the system by the resident as an “opt-in” feature.

This system will be especially important if there is a need for evacuations. While not replacing the communications tools already in place for First Responders, this system will also allow for streamlined communication to county employees who become disaster service workers in the event of an emergency. The system will provide a consistent form of communication across the region. It also provides the flexibility to pinpoint information for specific areas.

While the County spearheaded development of the system, it is a partnership between the County and the cities, allowing for cost sharing and streamlined coordination.

On a different front, the interaction between individuals with mental health issues and our criminal justice system can often be complicated and cause unintended consequences. The unnecessary arrest and incarceration of people with mental illness clogs our criminal justice system at an enormous cost. Experts estimate that 10% of all police emergency responses involve a person with mental illness in crisis.

Prisoners in the United States have rates of mental illness that are up to 4 times greater than rates of the general population. The mentally ill often commit minor misdemeanors, are incarcerated, released and then returned to jail for new minor crimes related to their illness, creating a never-ending cycle.

Traditionally, mental health providers and public safety professionals have worked independently. In this County, this is changing. I am proud to support a collaborative effort known as Mental Health Urgent Care (MHUC). Prior to the creation of MHUC, police officers had few options for dealing with people with mental illnesses that do not meet the requirements to be held involuntarily.

MHUC operates a crisis center that is accessible for voluntary walk-ins 24 hours a day. It offers screenings, crisis counseling, medication, referrals, and other resources. Staff also provide phone support to officers in the field, and, in some instances, a mobile crisis response.

Funding comes from Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act of 2004. This law create a 1% tax on personal income over \$1 million for use in new mental health programs. In a time of limited resources, it is one more way that we can solve our problems through creativity and cooperation.