

A mean-spirited, and politically motivated attack by know-nothing ideologues is focusing on some of California's most vulnerable citizens.

Using some of the millions of dollars distributed by the Schwarzenegger Administration in the name of fighting fraud in California's In Home Supportive Services (IHSS) program, Stanislaus County earlier this year created a Special Investigations Unit.

Agents from the unit have been conducting unannounced raids on homes, harassing and intimidating elderly, blind, and disabled citizens, and arbitrarily cutting people's homecare services.

Agents have confronted people in walkers and wheelchairs. Several people were so traumatized by these raids that they were subsequently hospitalized.

From the Modesto Bee, September 1, 2010: *Backed by anxious supporters, some on crutches or in wheelchairs, nearly two-dozen passionate speakers on Tuesday railed against "Gestapo" tactics of Stanislaus County home care fraud investigators.*

*"I'm afraid, my wife is afraid, and I don't think people should live in fear," recipient Donald Smith said after limping to the speaker's rostrum. "I'm not trying to cheat the government," he said.*

*Linda Ibrahim of Modesto and daughter Holly Yonan described a relative with Down's Syndrome who became terrified after he was awakened by agents who "stormed in" and searched his bedroom, Yonan said. The 51-year-old man urinated on himself, then locked himself in a bathroom, wouldn't come out for hours, and now awakes in fear at all times of night and is afraid to leave the house. "It was a horrible experience," Ibrahim added. "We're not criminals. We're decent people."*

Agents have claimed that many of these people are guilty of IHSS fraud, and have arbitrarily reduced their homecare service hours. Administrative law judges have already overturned some of these reductions because of lack of evidence or improper procedures. Many other cases are being appealed.

Despite this, the Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors voted recently to continue to spend taxpayers' money on this "anti-fraud" program because of its "success," but have not been able to document any fraud, or define what they mean by "success."

Signed into law by then-Gov. Ronald Reagan, IHSS is a national model for community-based care that allows more than 450,000 low-income infirm and disabled Californians to stay in their own homes and communities, rather than having to be institutionalized. It costs a little more than \$10,000 a year, at the very maximum level of disability, to care for someone under IHSS. Most cases are served at far less cost. Without the program, individuals would be forced into a nursing home or skilled nursing institution. This would cost taxpayers a minimum of \$36,000 a year. Most would require much higher cost services!

Ignoring these savings and the vulnerable people the program serves, California's Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has targeted IHSS almost from the day he arrived in Sacramento.

Schwarzenegger has mounted a campaign aimed at branding IHSS consumers, and the low-wage providers who care for them, as "fraud criminals." Republican candidate, Meg Whitman has joined this "fraud" campaign and promises to spend even more to root out this "evil."

Unfortunately, despite the fact that this absurd claim of "massive" fraud in IHSS remains unproven, the governor was able to convince the State Legislature to appropriate \$36,000,000 in last year's budget for an IHSS "anti-fraud" program. Among other things, this sent millions of dollars to the counties so that they could start their own anti-fraud efforts. This was done despite the fact that the State has no money, and despite the fact that every investigation of IHSS has shown that "fraud" in this program is less than one percent. And most of this small percentage is because of case backlog by overworked eligibility staff.

So far, Stanislaus has been one of the most zealous in using this money. But the county's uniformed "fraud squad" may be a precursor of what will happen all across the state unless the public demands that these abuses stop.

I was always taught that people were presumed innocent until proven guilty. I guess this is still true ... except, it seems, in the Governor's office, in Stanislaus County, and in Meg Whitman's campaign.

When Rome burned, Nero blamed the Christians. When the Reichstag building burned, Hitler blamed the Jews. It seems that California's economy is in a mess, so Schwarzenegger, Whitman, and a few others are blaming the disabled.