

LOCAL NEWS

L.A. County supervisors end adult, youth job training contracts with LA Works

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The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday ended two more contracts with a San Gabriel Valley job training program less than a month after letting a third expire.

LA Works lost half its yearly \$12 million budget last month when the supervisors allowed an inmate job training program to expire after learning LA Works overbilled the county by nearly \$1 million in services for inmates and nurses. The two contracts ended Tuesday are worth roughly \$3 million. The programs were designed to help adults and teens find jobs.

“I know there are errors in billing and everyone has them but \$1 million in overbilling is really quite substantial,” said Supervisor Gloria Molina. “It is really denying people of low-income means to really take advantage of this type of program. They were misappropriating and misusing it.”

The decision to end the contracts left LA Works uncertain about its future, as county funding makes up 80 percent of the organizations’ budget, according to LA Works Chairman and Covina Councilman Kevin Stapleton.

“We thought we were doing a pretty good job, we thought we were doing a positive for the community,” Stapleton said.



County auditors found LA Works overbilled \$858,000 in reimbursements for a program that helped low-income employees get high-paying nursing jobs and approximately \$100,000 for a program for county jail inmates. Auditors found that roughly 80 percent of nurses enrolled in an on-the-job training program provided by LA Works did not qualify for the assistance as they were making as much as \$32 per hour already.

Stapleton called the overbilling a mistake because the two hospitals they partnered with certified that none of the people were employed at the time. Regardless, LA Works plans to pay back the \$850,000 if given the chance to continue its work.

Cynthia Banks, director of Los Angeles County Community and Senior Services, indicated the county would collect the debt through LA Works assets if it needs to.

In a 3-2 vote, supervisors voted to let a contract for adult services — which covered the overbilled on-the-job training program — expire at the end of June and terminated a second contract for youth services that would expire in the next two years. The board went into closed session briefly when Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky refused to ask a question publicly after being told the auditor did not find any signs of fraud in its analysis.

“There are certain things that we’ve been asked not to discuss, and I’ve been asked not to discuss them,” Yaroslavsky said. “I understand it was far more serious than this.”

The contracts were not listed as a closed-session item, but were added by the board in an “urgency finding.” The closed session made it hard for LA Works to defend itself, Stapleton said. He knew of no indications of wrongdoing.

“If there is something going on, I want whoever is involved in it prosecuted to the max,” he said.

The person in charge of the on-the-job training program is no longer with LA Works and the organization plans to hire a new CEO, he said.

More than a dozen clients and employees pleaded for the board to grant LA Works a reprieve. Many described an organization where employees took calls off the clock and gave up free time to help others get employment.

A teary-eyed Mary Lou Lemoine, of West Covina, said she lost her job as an executive after 40 years and found the job market had changed dramatically when she started to apply elsewhere.

“To my surprise, no one would hire me because they said I was too overqualified,” Lemoine said. “I spent a year looking.”



Lemoine went to LA Works for help and actually ended up working for the organization. LA Works helped Jonathan Quintero, of La Puente, find a programming job that led to work for companies like Google and Hewlett-Packard.

“I was trying to find software-related jobs in the industry but I was competing against people that had 10, 20, 30 years experienced in the industry,” Quintero said. “LA Works finally gave me the opportunity to show what I can do.”

LA Works will no longer provide those services as of July 1, but Banks said other contractors in Pomona, West Covina and El Monte will fill the gap. The county will notify current LA Works clients and place signs at LA Works’ office in Irwindale to direct new clients to other organizations.

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