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Contractors overbill county

Problems found in 10 out of 11 job programs

By Troy Anderson, Staff Writer

Contractors hired to provide job-training programs for thousands of immigrant refugees on welfare overbilled Los Angeles County by as much as 62 percent, according to an audit released Monday.

The audit is part of a yearlong investigation into misuse of taxpayer funds involving contractors with the county's senior services and welfare departments.

The contractors involved in the most recent audit provide job training to nearly 4,400 immigrant refugees, predominantly Armenians, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Cantonese and Russians.

"Some of these agencies owe us a lot of money," Supervisor Gloria Molina said. "There is no doubt that we can't blame everybody because we are as much at fault. But the reality is there is \$2.9 million outstanding. The abuse was pretty horrendous."

The Auditor-Controller's Office reviewed 11 Refugee Immigrant Training and Employment Program contractors and found that 10 overstated employment and job training outcomes, resulting in the contractors' overbilling of the Department of Community and Senior Services, which oversaw the contractors for the past six years.

"For example, some contractors billed the county for placing participants in employment for which they were paid based on piecework rather than an hourly wage, as required by the contract," auditors wrote. "Other contractors billed the county for placing participants in full-time jobs when the participants were already employed full-time with the same employer. And some contractors billed the case management and Job Club services when the participant did not receive all the required service components."

The 10 contractors overbilled the county anywhere from 13 to 62 percent on the sampling of bills the auditors examined.

The county was overbilled \$25,962, or 35 percent, on sample billings totaling \$75,007.

Citing "significant problems" uncovered in the reviews, Auditor-Controller Tyler McCauley recommended that the responsibility for administering and providing services to immigrant refugees be transferred to the Department of Public Social Services, which previously provided the services.

At the Sept. 21 Board of Supervisors meeting, Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said there was a "wide disparity" between the performance levels of some contractors.

"My problem is we are punishing the agencies that have performed well because some agencies did not perform well," Yaroslavsky said. "There is no reason to believe that our in-house people are doing to have any better or worse track record as some of these

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agencies have had."

As a compromise, Yaroslavsky recommended that DPSS establish a pilot project with the "most effective" RITE contractors to provide case management services. McCauley recommended that Jewish Vocational Services and Pacific Asian Consortium in Employment be part of the pilot project.

The supervisors voted Sept. 21 to extend the 11 contracts to Dec. 31 to allow for a smooth transition.

The supervisors will vote today whether to transfer responsibility of the program to DPSS and whether to approve the pilot project. Unless the supervisors decide to extend the contracts with the other nine providers, those contracts are expected to expire on Dec. 31.

"We are in full agreement and are working with the auditor and DPSS to make this a smooth transition," senior services department spokeswoman Patricia Senette-Holt said.

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