

California town to charge residents for 911 emergency calls

By Kevin Martinez
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The town of Tracy, California, located approximately 60 miles east of San Francisco, will now charge several hundred dollars for emergency calls. The City Council voted on February 16 to approve a contract with a private company that will bill people who dial 911 whenever the fire department responds to medical emergencies or car accidents.

As part of an attempt to close a \$9 million budget deficit, city officials in Tracy have sought new ways to increase revenues by charging its citizens for basic services that are normally provided free of charge. Last Tuesday, the Council voted four-to-one to contract ADPI-Intermedix, a company based in Oakland, California, to have a billing system ready by next month. The company will receive 15 percent of all the fees generated by Tracy.

According to an article in the *Tracy-Press* on February 16, "Residents will pay \$300 for every fire department response to a medical emergency. Non-residents can expect to pay \$400. There is no set cost for a fire department visit to a car accident. The city is working out an option so that households can pay an annual membership fee of \$48, which would cover the cost of any emergency aid given during the course of a year."

In other words, like some sort of sales promotion on television, if someone expects to call 911 several times a year, they can get a bargain if they "act now" and buy the annual membership. Otherwise, it will cost them considerably more.

One Tracy councilwoman remarked that the next time her husband has a heart attack, she will be tempted to set her kitchen table on fire to avoid paying the fee.

At the end of 2009, unemployment stood at 9.5 percent in Tracy. The city's population has been significantly affected by the jobs crisis in Northern

California. The area has many residents who commute to San Francisco for employment, with workers choosing Tracy as a place to live because it offered lower housing costs compared to cities closer to the metropolitan region.

According to *RealtyTrac*, 1 out of every 65 homes was in foreclosure as of January 2010. The percentage of housing units in Tracy in the process of being repossessed by the bank is three times higher than that of the state as a whole.

Now, under conditions in which thousands have lost their jobs and homes, and many more are struggling to hold onto them, those who live in the city will have to think twice about calling for help in a life-threatening emergency. The result of the City Council's imposition of fees for 911 calls will be twofold: on the one hand, more people will die and on the other hand, ADPI-Intermedix will make a tidy profit.

The charging of 911 calls in Tracy is just one manifestation of a larger process whereby the working class is being forced to bail out local and state governments through an array of higher fees and service reductions. In Los Angeles, the city faces a \$400 million deficit this fiscal year, and another \$400 million the following year. The number could double to \$878 million in 2012-2013 and approach \$1 billion in 2013-2014.

Against this backdrop, a panel was held on January 21 in Los Angeles entitled "Dollars and Sense: Is LA on the road to bankruptcy?" The panelists included former Police Chief Bernard Parks, who chairs the City Council's Budget and Finance Committee, Julie Butcher, regional director of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 721, Chief Legislative Analyst Gerry Miller and Chief Administrative Officer Miguel Santana.

With public safety accounting for 62 percent of the city's budget, Parks argued, "I don't think you can avoid [public safety cuts]." The other two city officials suggested cutting pension benefits. "It's impossible to get through the next three years without pension reform," Santana said.

The convening of the panel coincided with the signing of a letter by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa that asked Santana to axe 1,000 city workers, and agree to 363 early retirements, on top of 2,400 early retirements already authorized after negotiations with the unions. It also proposed limiting the city's role in managing the Convention Center, the Los Angeles Zoo, and public golf courses.

Last Thursday, the Los Angeles City Council voted nine-to-three to lay off 3,000 city workers by July 1. If one includes the aforementioned 2,400 early retirements, it will bring the total reduction in the number of city workers to 6,400.

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