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The state of California needs to realign its priorities. For too long, the culture of California politics has perpetuated the growth of government through expansive new programs and benefits, creating chronic budget problems that only seem to be worsening.

After weeks of impasse last year, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and state legislators finally came to an agreement that temporarily resolved the state's oversized budget gap. Now California faces the same problem it did a year ago, this time with a budget deficit of $19.1 billion.

This shortfall did not occur overnight. An overly generous entitlement system and plenty of other costly expenditures have put California in a dangerous position. The solution is not to tax and spend more, especially in today's tough economy, but rather to initiate significant budget cuts to programs that are putting the state deeper in debt.

Even against the backdrop of an impending budget debate, California once again demonstrated to the rest of America why it's in such turmoil. Both state and local leaders – in several instances involving matters outside their purview – went to considerable length to showcase just how far out of touch many of them are with the realities facing California.

One example is the state's recent symbolic gesture on "don't ask, don't tell." After lengthy debate, the state Legislature passed a measure urging the federal government to end its policy on gays in the military. This resolution will not help California solve its budget crisis, nor will it have any measurable impact on federal lawmakers involved in this debate, particularly when they hear from their own constituents quite often on this and other issues.

The same practice was adopted by the San Diego City Council on the issue of illegal immigration. By a near unanimous vote, the council approved a resolution calling for the repeal of Arizona's new illegal immigration law, citing baseless concerns with racial profiling and constitutional infringement. Its time would have been better served evaluating the impact of illegal immigration on our community or reconsidering San Diego's status as a sanctuary city.

Then there is the San Diego Unified School District board's decision to condemn Arizona's immigration law. The board called for administrators to devise a plan to restrict any travel to Arizona by employees for official school business. Similar to the situation at City Hall, there are far more pressing issues facing our local schools that demand the board's attention.

Last year, California released more than 16,000 educators due to the state's budget situation. In my own district, there have been at least 354 educator layoffs for the same reason. The focus should be on trying to retain many of these educators in light of budget constraints and improving the overall quality of education, not restricting travel to Arizona because there is disagreement with another state's approach to a crisis of its own.

These are only a few examples, but each serves to illustrate an important point: California needs to refocus on its own problems and begin the deliberative process of closing its own budget deficit. Stating a position on defense policy or the enforcement approach favored by another state are nothing more than a distraction from the tough choices and commitment to change that must occur at all levels.

The same goes for the federal government. It is time to spend less and save more. To be fair, Congress has its share of distractions, but calls to curb spending and restore fiscal discipline are growing louder and consistently reflected in alternatives to proposals put forward by the majority leadership.

When it comes to the budget, anything short of confronting the unavoidable reality of our current fiscal condition is a disservice to every Californian and the rest of the American people. Making difficult choices and exercising restraint would demonstrate that our priorities are right where they need to be – in line with the practices and interests of working families and taxpayers.