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YOUR VIEW

Social services union pushes for Pennsylvania budget that maintains needed services

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Those of us who work in public services know that, when the economy is at its worst, our jobs become even harder, due to budget cuts, staffing shortages and slumping tax revenues. Yet this is the time when our jobs become even more vital.

When people are in need -- unemployed, losing their homes, unable to feed their families -- they come to us. We provide the unemployment services, job services, food stamps and home heating help that our most vulnerable friends and neighbors need to survive.

The 2009-10 state budget was balanced by draining the Rainy Day Fund and taking money from other one-time sources. The absence of these funds means our state is facing another budget crisis, which cannot be fixed by further cuts to vital human services programs.

The state budget proposed by Gov. Ed Rendell is an austere budget with no new initiatives or programs. Most existing programs will continue to be underfunded, with most departments being cut and a few areas seeing modest increases.

Public services have already been cut to the bone. Without some recurring revenue sources, there will be even more cuts to public services and many more agencies will close their doors. These cuts affect vulnerable children, people with mental disabilities, senior citizens, and their families. Additionally, more cuts will slow the economic recovery and cost jobs.

Our union's members handle 911 calls and provide mental health and retardation services.

We work in the departments of Aging and Children & Youth, providing much-needed services to children and senior citizens. Our members work in the corrections system, helping to keep our communities safe.

We provide unemployment, vocational rehabilitation, as well as blind and visual services. Our members work in county parks and courthouses, even municipalities.

Anywhere you hear the words "public services," you will find members of Pennsylvania's Service Employees International Union Local 668.

So what should be done to balance the needs of taxpayers with the increased need for public services?

We know a bill passed by the state House is not going to be the final 2010-11 state budget -- there will be many changes before a budget is finally passed. So, our union calls on Pennsylvania state senators to consider a more balanced approach to resolving this fiscal challenge. This budget shortfall cannot be solved by cutting programs alone.

Some proposals that we believe legislators should consider include taxing smokeless tobacco (Pennsylvania is the only state that does not tax this product), the Marcellus Shale natural gas extraction tax, closing the Delaware corporate tax loophole, and expanding the sales tax to cover nonessential items and services while reducing the rate. All of these



proposals would increase tax fairness in our state and provide needed revenues for important services.

In addition, legislators should get serious about making government more efficient, by heeding Auditor General Jack Wagner's recommendations on reducing the number of no-bid contracts and technological systems that do not work and waste millions of taxpayer dollars.

SEIU Local 668 members have made many suggestions on how to increase government efficiency.

Not only would our proposals save money for taxpayers but our suggestions for operational improvements also would provide more effective service to those who need it most.

It's time for legislators to take a serious look at our union's proposals.

If we do not invest in, and take care of, our citizens now, then someday your 911 emergency call will be put on hold or your aging grandmother will not get the home services she needs. There will be no one to help you get heating fuel or food stamps or health care for your child when you lose your job and your home. The American Dream will become the American Nightmare.

Kathy Jellison is the president of SEIU Local 668.

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