

Our View: Cut state agencies first

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The 2009 legislative session opens Wednesday. Gov. M. Jodi Rell will address a joint session of the House of Representatives and Senate, no doubt delivering a sobering assessment of the state's financial picture.

In her speech, she will likely provide some insight into the difficult decisions she will be making in preparing a two-year state budget to be delivered in February.

The state's financial situation is well documented. The budget is running a deficit; the projected shortfall in state revenue during the next two years is estimated at \$6 billion.

Much already has been said about the need to trim state spending in order to provide necessary state services. But what hasn't been discussed very much are the priorities. The legislature and governor will eventually adopt a two-year spending plan — but where will that money be spent?

Catastrophic cuts

Several weeks ago, we urged elected officials to make education a priority. The prospects of a 10 percent across-the-board cut in state education aid would be devastating to municipalities, and would serve only as passing the buck to cities and towns and ultimately onto local property taxpayers.

Similar cuts in higher education funding would have similar consequences, potentially putting college out of reach for many families.

Today, however, we also urge elected leaders to make funding for nonprofits a priority in determining how state resources can best be spent. If state spending cuts are needed, it should first come from within state agencies that provide duplicate services by better-compensated state employees at a far greater cost to taxpayers. Nonprofits are more efficient and as effective — and at a considerable savings to the state and taxpayers.

We have consistently advocated for nonprofit, social service agencies providing critical services to residents who are most in need of assistance. It is an investment in people, and the return on that investment is immeasurable. The services provided by these agencies cannot be replicated at the same cost savings to the state if the state were forced to assume the responsibility these agencies have. Yet, a lack of sufficient financial support from the state through the years has placed many of these organizations in difficult financial positions, forcing some to curtail services and programs in order to keep the doors open.

Back to basics

The governor has talked about returning state government to its basic core principles. She has noted that in recent years many social service programs have been expanded in an effort to extend assistance to citizens needing help but not eligible under stricter eligibility rules. She has suggested it may be necessary in light of the state's financial situation to return to those higher eligibility limits.

That means individuals and families will be eliminated from assistance programs, yet the need for assistance will not. Given the economic climate, the number of those in need has grown.

The nonprofits have seen that increase and have been forced to do more with less. And to their credit, they have.