

YOUR VIEW: Terry Edelstein

Fund Community-Based Service Agencies

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In this time of fiscal austerity, there is at least one part of the state budget government cannot continue to shortchange. In every city and town, the state government relies on nonprofit, private community-based agencies to deliver human services to people with special needs.

Hundreds of thousands of people with mental illness, substance-use disorders and developmental and physical disabilities, receive care from human-service providers who have been stretched thin by years of inadequate government funding. There is no argument that this is the most fiscally responsible method of providing this form of health care.

State government relies on community-based agencies to deliver quality care, but year after year purposely underfunds the programs. In effect, the state budget is being balanced on the backs of people who are severely challenged by various forms of disability and who often cannot advocate for themselves.

Every single member of the General Assembly has constituents served by this system and each community-provider client has a family that also benefits. Even so, the continued underfunding of these important human services has been one of the most reliable means to cut state costs — though it results in personal health care crisis for many.

In her February budget proposal, Gov. M. Jodi Rell maintained level funding for most community providers, but made substantial cuts in other parts of the safety net for people with disabilities. This unfortunately continues a pattern of refusing to pay the full cost for core government services for people in need. A Democratic plan would cut further.

If the legislature adopts the governor's proposal, it will mean three consecutive years of level funding for social service programs, at a time of economic crisis, when the need for such services is increasing and costs are rising. As a policy it is unsustainable.

The governor very eloquently argued at the start of this legislative session that Connecticut needed to return to a back-to-basics approach. She said we need to focus on the core functions of government and stop spending on programs "we would like to have" and instead focus on those programs "we need to have."

Providing help to neighbors and families who require special care is not a luxury. It is one of the core missions of government. It is a position the most liberal Democrat or the most conservative Republican can agree on. We, as a society, should not allow people with mental illness, substance-use disorders, developmental or physical disabilities to go without essential supports, or even worse, carry the financial burden for the rest of us.

As the state faces a fiscal crisis, there are those who say we must all share the pain, but for clients served by the community provider system — and their families — the pain is already there and it is growing.

It would be irresponsible, for community-provider advocates to look the other way and accept a

public policy that sacrifices quality care for the most frail among us.

Connecticut citizens with special needs have been forced to sacrifice silently on behalf of others for too long. If we are going to rebuild Connecticut's fiscal health with a state budget based on core government services, then proper funding of the community-provider system is the place to begin. It is the most cost effective way to deliver high quality, life-changing health care, to the people who need it most.

•Terry Edelstein is president and CEO of the Connecticut Community Providers Association.