

Poor need more help from the state

Stamford Advocate Editorial

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If state legislators close their session at midnight tonight without amending next year's spending plan, which at the time of this writing appeared all but certain, in all likelihood it will poke holes in the safety net intended to catch those hit hardest by tough financial times like these.

Democrats, who control the Legislature, and Gov. M. Jodi Rell agreed last week to leave 2008-09 spending at the \$18.7 billion approved last year when the state adopted a two-year taxing and spending program.

It's unheard of for the General Assembly to not tweak the second year of a budget before it goes into effect, on July 1. Assembly leaders and the governor made the unusual decision to hold steady in the face of a somewhat sudden and expanding deficit.

But it's would be regrettable if the leadership holds on to its refusal to entertain an alternative spending plan introduced by Republicans, which could have provided additional funding to nursing homes and social service agencies in the coming year.

The economy has gotten much worse since the budget was passed last year, and nonprofit agencies are hurting badly. When the cost of food and oil goes up, and funding does not keep pace with regular cost-of-living increases, service agencies are forced to reduce social workers and other support staff. The result is more and more people, including children, spiral into despondency.

Republicans say an early retirement provision in their alternative plan would produce substantial savings. Perhaps, perhaps not. The governor's budget office says not. But it is worth talking about - even as minutes continue to tick off the clock.

Connecticut is one of the wealthiest states in the nation, but even in its wealthiest county - ours - there are too many people hurting. According to the American Community Survey conducted last year by the U.S. Census Bureau, 6.6 percent of Fairfield County residents were living below federal poverty levels - which doesn't take into account all those technically above poverty but who by any reasonable human measure would be considered poor.

The survey included several individual cities, including Stamford, with a poverty rate of 8.3 percent; and Norwalk, 6.4 percent. Furthermore, children in those cities living in poverty were measured at 9.2 percent and 9.9 percent, respectively. Individual numbers for Greenwich were not included. But we all know the truth behind the stereotype that the streets are paved with gold. Hundreds upon hundreds of kids in Greenwich schools qualify for free or subsidized meals and snacks under government programs.

Would the alternative spending plan make a big difference? Who knows? For sure, even with its provisions to provide for service agencies, more and more people would go without as the overall economy continues to tank.

There are no easy answers. Certainly spending and taxes have to be kept under control. But no reasonable person would doubt that enough money is wasted in the nooks and crannies of municipal and state budget plans to make heads spin. Everyone always talks about rooting it out, but it doesn't seem to happen, at least not in a substantial way. Still, going after waste won't provide relief that's needed right now.

No easy answers. That certainly is the truth. And we all - well, many of us - are hurting. But it's at times like this that it's most important to be mindful of those in actual despair.