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Hundreds Turn Out For Public Hearing On Budget Cuts

by Christine Stuart | Dec 9, 2009 3:53pm
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Local elected officials, health care advocates, and hundreds of individuals and organizations gathered Wednesday afternoon at the Legislative Office Building to address Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposed budget cuts.



CHRISTINE STUART PHOTO

The number of individuals prepared to testify totaled more than 350 and the legislature's Appropriations Committee was split in half so they could hear all the public testimony.

Carroll Hughes, a long-time lobbyist, said he was stunned at the diversity when he looked at the list of people signed up to testify.

"It's an expression of people's genuine interest in the whole process," Hughes said. "It looks more like a session day in March than Dec. 9."

Each individual was given three minutes to testify, which means lawmakers may be working late into the evening.

Stephen Frayne, senior vice president of health policy for the Connecticut Hospital Association, said when he testified lawmakers wanted him to quantify exactly what the 5 percent Medicaid reductions in the budget meant for the economy.

What he was able to tell them is that the governor has proposed cutting about \$80 million from hospitals and other Medicaid services. That \$80 million helps hospitals generate about \$200 million in economic activity. He said he doesn't know exactly how many jobs will be lost as a result of the proposed cuts, but promised to get back to them with a number since job losses would be inevitable.

What he was able to tell lawmakers was that in 2008 Connecticut hospitals lost more than \$300 million due to under-reimbursement for Medicaid patients. In addition since the start of the recession about 76,000 Connecticut residents have lost jobs and employer-paid health insurance coverage, and the Medicaid population has increased by 75,000. That means that close to 14 percent of the state's population is currently on Medicaid.

Lawmakers were also concerned with some of the reductions in medical services for low-income Connecticut residents. In addition to Medicaid cuts Rell has proposed eliminating non-emergency dental services for adults on Medicaid, increasing co-payments for the Husky insurance program, and freezing enrollment in the Charter Oak Health Plan for uninsured adults.

When lawmakers asked Rell's Budget Secretary Robert Genuario about the cuts, he said freezing enrollment to the Charter Oak Health Plan is not something the governor relishes. "The Charter Oak Health Plan is near and dear to the governor's heart," Genuario said.

But he said she's more concerned about the \$337 million deficit, which will balloon to an estimated \$3 billion in 2012.

Terry Edelstein, president and CEO of the Community Providers Association, said the proposed cuts would "decimate the private provider system." She said all these medical services provided by a number of state agencies are all interconnected.

"Our system is already stretched dangerously thin with three years of flat funding coupled with decades of underfunding and increasing operating cuts," Edelstein told lawmakers.

Joe Sullivan, president and CEO of Midwestern Connecticut Council on

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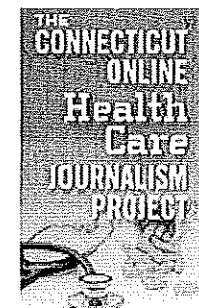


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Joe Genuario, president and CEO of Northwestern Connecticut Council on Alcoholism, said if these cuts were allowed to go into effect he would have to cut 24 full-time positions and close two of the eight programs his organization runs. As a result the clients he's no longer able to serve will end up in an emergency room or jail where the state will be paying twice as much for their care, he said.

Aside from cuts to medical services, mental health treatment, and programs for the elderly and children, lawmakers expressed concern about the proposed \$84 million cut in municipal aid.

"Governor Rell does not relish the proposal to reduce municipal aid," Genuario told lawmakers Wednesday morning. However, given where the state budget it "we can't exempt any area," he said.

"To suggest municipalities are not part of the problem is to ignore the math," Genuario said. In fact, municipal revenue derived mostly from property taxes is more stable than state revenues, he opined.

The Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, the largest lobby for cities and towns, testified that municipalities are caught between a rock and a hard place. They said further cuts "would not make the state budget problem go away - it would just shift it from the state to towns and cities and the property tax."

A mid-year cut to the city of New Haven would probably mean a cut of \$8.4 million, or about 42 percent of what's left in New Haven's budget.

The group of municipal leaders and lawmakers met again Wednesday to see if they couldn't reach a consensus regarding which unfunded state mandates they would like to see postponed or eliminated.

Genuario said if the group was unable to come to a consensus Rell would make her own suggestions.

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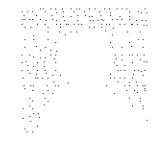
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posted by: meridenite | December 9, 2009 6:28pm



This is part of the problem. 350 lined up to speak all with their hands out for more, more and more from the budget.

posted by: City Hall Watch | December 10, 2009 12:55pm



Did anybody have a suggestion as to what should be cut if their program is spared?

posted by: Christine Stuart | December 10, 2009 1:21pm



One person supported the cuts but I missed their testimony and Jamey Bell of CT Voices suggested they look at some of the tax credits/expenditures to see if they can't save money that way.