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Assembly must find aid for nonprofits

As the Legislature's Appropriations Committee begins to firm up its proposed budget for the next biennium it must give serious consideration to finding money to permit a cost of living adjustment to the state's nonprofit providers.

The community providers, who offer programs as diverse as meals on wheels, halfway houses for inmates leaving prison, mental health programs and rehabilitation services for disabled citizens, have been left out in the cold in Gov. M. Jodi Reil's proposed \$35.7 billion two-year budget.

The governor did not include any cost of living adjustment monies after the nonprofit providers received COLA adjustments totaling 6 percent during the past two state budgets.

Nonprofit providers represent a substantial benefit to state taxpayers because they offer services to tens of thousands of state residents — at a lower cost — than the state would have to provide through state employees if the nonprofit agencies didn't exist.

Studies demonstrate, for example, that employees of nonprofits earn less than 60 percent of the salary and benefits enjoyed by state employees.

However, the nonprofits fear they will face layoffs and further downsizing in the face of escalating costs for items such as energy, health insurance and liability insurance if they cannot secure a modicum of state aid.

Advocacy groups for the nonprofits are lobbying for a COLA of 12 percent over the next two years, the highest the groups have ever sought. That carries a price tag of \$180 million over the two-year budget.

That request may be too ambitious given the dedicated emphasis on expanded education funding that both sides of the political aisle are embracing this session.

State lawmakers, however, need to approve funding for a healthy portion of that COLA request so that these local community providers can maintain the health and human services they currently offer our citizens.