

# Idea of state Internet ads draws fire

01:00 AM EST on Tuesday, January 22, 2008

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Journal State House Bureau

PROVIDENCE — In an age when more and more people have computers — but many still don't — Governor Carcieri's attempt to free government agencies from having to advertise any proposed rule changes in a newspaper is stirring up a hornet's nest.

The proposal drew little attention when it first emerged 101 pages into the 119-page midyear, deficit-avoidance plan that Carcieri proposed last week.

But the more people that have read it on the state budget office Web site, the more controversy it has generated among people and groups concerned that it will make it harder for anyone without easy access to a computer — including many of the state's elderly — to find out what government wants to do to the benefits and programs on which they rely.

The Rhode Island Affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union and the coalition known as AccessRI have raised what they call serious right-to-know concerns. An advocate for the poor says the move may be inevitable, but the secretary of state's Web site would need to make a "massive investment" to make the idea work. And, Secretary of State A. Ralph Mollis — whose Web site would become the new home for these notices — dubs it a bad idea.

"We certainly do not oppose efforts to make this information available electronically, but the newspaper public-notice remains an important avenue for individuals who do not or cannot easily access computers or the Internet," said ACLU executive director Steven Brown. "There remains a significant digital divide in Rhode Island, as in the rest of the country. Many people still do not have easy access to the Internet," he noted.

Added Mollis spokesman Chris Barnett: "We will find it hard to support a proposal that appears to make government less transparent and while the Internet is available to virtually every Rhode Islander, the public is simply used to turning to their newspaper for information like this."

Under current law, only the Department of Health is exempt from a state law requiring the publication at least 30 days in advance — "in a newspaper of general circulation" — of the "adoption, amendment or repeal of any rule." The advance notice is supposed to give members of the public ample time to make their views known — and perhaps influence the rule change — by submitting "data, views or arguments orally or in writing."

One agency — the Department of Human Services — has run more than a half dozen such notices in The Providence Journal since early November. One served notice that, starting New Year's Day, families eligible for financial assistance from the state's welfare program would no longer be considered automatically eligible for medical-assistance benefits as well. Another dealt with the per-diem charge for maintenance to be imposed on residents of the Veterans Home in Bristol.

A second state agency, the Department of Elderly Affairs, sent shockwaves through the advocacy community with an advertised proposal to hike the co-pays for people in adult daycare.

Instead of placing such legal notices in a newspaper, Carcieri suggests they go somewhere on the secretary of state's Web site.

It remains unclear how much the state might save. The state budget office did not highlight how much the state spends annually on paid legal notices — and conversely, how much it expects to save from their elimination — when it laid out the governor's budget-cutting proposals last week. When asked, state budget officer Rosemary Gallogly said no savings from the move had been incorporated in the budget cuts.

And when asked again yesterday how much the Carcieri administration expected to save by ending the newspaper ads, spokesman Jeff Neal said the information was unavailable because most of state government was shut down in honor of the late Dr. Martin Luther King.

But he defended the Carcieri move on other grounds, saying: "We believe that Internet use has become sufficiently pervasive and widespread that it is sensible to reduce taxpayers costs by replacing paid advertisements in local newspapers with notices on an official state Web site.

"The vast majority of Rhode Islanders can access the Internet through a personal computer or through a computer at a public library. If this proposal is approved by the General Assembly, we would be happy to review the state's electronic posting procedures to ensure that this information is easily accessible on the state's Internet portal."

In fact, the U.S. Department of Commerce placed Rhode Island slightly ahead of the national curve in 2003 with 55.7 percent of the population having access to the Internet, and 62.3 percent of the population having a computer at home for some purpose that did not in all cases include Internet access. More recent numbers are not yet available.

But the continuing divide worried the ACLU's Brown, who said a lot of the regulations up for discussion "affect the elderly and the poor, who are constituencies that are least likely to have Internet access." While they might use a computer at a public library, Brown said the most common "filtering software" to block access to objectionable sites,

such as pornography, might also block out rules dealing with HIV-treatment, sexually-transmitted diseases and breast cancer.

As the president of AccessRI, Barbara Meagher, a former Channel 6 reporter who currently teaches journalism at the University of Rhode Island, questioned what would draw the average person to the secretary of state's Web site daily on the off-chance a state agency was proposing a rule change.

"I mean everybody has certain places they go to for news every day and it tends to be a newspaper or a news Web site or whatever are your favorites ... But I don't really know if the secretary of state's Web site is a 'habit'," she said. "I don't think it is."

Even if there were a dollar savings, she said: "Not everyone has access to the Internet right now ... The government has a responsibility to get out there to the people," and even if that "costs something, I think the price is too high not to do that."

The chairwoman of the URI journalism department, Linda Levin, said her first thought when she heard of Carcieri's proposal was: "it's inevitable."

But "If they are going to do that," she said the information has to be placed "where it is easily accessible" and not on a government Web site where "you have to dig deep to find the information you want." As an alternative — or complement — she suggests government place the notices in paid ads on a newspaper Web site.

Linda Katz, the longtime Legal Aid lawyer who is now the policy director for the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College, said she is not averse to Internet postings.

"In an electronic age, it's not a bad idea to look at posting these notices electronically, but the secretary of state has a long way to go to make sure that that information is available to people in a meaningful manner," she said. "If this is going to be a substitute for newspaper notice, then it really requires a massive investment from the secretary of state's office of setting up a Web site that clearly lists proposed rule-making in a timely manner. I think that's no small feat."

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