

Welfare cuts decried

Advocates for the poor rail against the governor's proposals to trim social-service programs, but some lawmakers agree that change is needed

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PROVIDENCE -- Facing a yawning budget deficit, lawmakers yesterday listened once again to pleas that they not make deep cuts to the state's social-service programs.

Almost everybody in two State House hearings acknowledged the state's fiscal constraints. What they couldn't agree on was where to trim.

Advocates for the poor said Governor Carcieri's agenda would hinder people struggling to get out of poverty, make it harder for domestic-violence victims to leave abusers and push the poor away from preventive medicine and into emergency rooms.

Carcieri calls Rhode Island's welfare program "one of the most generous" in the country.

In his budget, he proposes to reduce the amount of time people can spend on welfare and, in general, to make the rules more stringent. For instance, he suggests counting time spent on assistance in other states toward the Rhode Island limit.

Digital Extra

Governor Carcieri's proposal for the supplemental budget for fiscal 2006, which ends June 30

Governor Carcieri's budget proposal for fiscal 2007, which begins July 1

This bill would soften the requirements of work participation for welfare recipients by adding "job search" to the definition of allowable "work activities."

The governor also wants to reduce the number of people receiving state-subsidized health care and require them to pay a larger share of the premiums.

While Senate Finance Committee Chairman Stephen D. Alves, D-West Warwick, talked about the General Assembly's "long history" of supporting these programs, he and several others did acknowledge the need for change in some areas.

To cut welfare drastically, Alves said "is foolhardy," However, the senator said "we need to tighten up some" of the job-training programs.

Lissa Dreyer, executive director of Jobs for Progress Inc., a Pawtucket-based nonprofit agency that provides job training and placement for welfare recipients, voiced similar sentiments at a House Finance Committee hearing yesterday. She spoke about Carcieri's plan to cut families from the welfare rolls if they don't comply with a state-approved employment plan within three months.

"These proposals may have merit to them," Dreyer said. "We do want people to be sanctioned, not because we want them to get hurt, but . . . sometimes that's the only way to" get people working.

But most who spoke yesterday were nowhere near as supportive of the Republican governor's ideas.

Heidi Collins, director of Rhode Island Parents for Progress, accused Carcieri of "dismantling" the Family Independence Program, Rhode Island's version of welfare-to-work reform.

Ben Lessing, executive director of Family Resources Community Action in Woonsocket, predicted that children in families whose FIP payments end "will fail academically. They will end up in the child welfare system. They will end up in placement services, and they will end up incarcerated."

Advocates from the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College tried to show just how devastating they believe Carcieri's proposal to increase a participant's cost for childcare and medical coverage would be.

To meet a basic standard of living, a single parent with two children needs to earn \$49,900 a year, the group said.

However, that same family can survive on about \$25,000 a year -- 150 percent of the federal poverty level -- if they receive public assistance. That family currently pays \$80 a month for childcare and nothing for health care.

After paying for housing, food, transportation, clothing, diapers, and other everyday expenses, that family is left with just \$40 to spend on discretionary items, they said.

Carcieri's proposal increases the participant's share of the childcare premium to \$121 a month, institutes a medical premium for the children and removes the parent

from state-subsidized health care. The Poverty Institute estimates that those new premiums and the cost of that parent obtaining his or her own health care would cost \$222 a month.

With those new costs, the family would face a monthly shortfall of \$223.

Christiane Petrin Lambert, executive director of Community Action Partnership, said in written testimony that parents who have access to education and training have a higher average hourly wage -- \$11.37 compared with \$8.66 -- than those who don't.

"A cut to a person's access to education and training opportunities is counter-intuitive and counterproductive," she wrote. "If our overall goal as a society is to encourage all members to achieve their greatest potential . . . then wouldn't it benefit us all to support people with optimal skill-building toward a higher paying job?"

When it came to Carcieri's proposals regarding subsidized health care, Alves said it would be "one of the first priorities" of his committee to restore the cuts.

Taking away health care, Alves said, doesn't solve the problem. "You're just pushing it off to other agencies," such as hospital emergency rooms.

Mark Reynolds, CEO of Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island, said that the uninsured are "more likely to receive too little medical care and receive it too late; be sicker and die sooner."