

Potential Carcieri staff cuts up to 536

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With the next round of layoff notifications scheduled for today, Governor Carcieri yesterday dusted off his thwarted welfare-cutting plans from earlier years, talked about relying instead on “faith-based” organizations and unexpectedly raised the number of state workers facing potential layoffs by more than 100.

Asked yesterday why the number seemed to grow overnight, he said: “It was never a fixed number.”

Lawmakers, meanwhile, warned local communities that budget cuts wouldn’t be isolated to state employees or state programs.

With the state facing a budget hole as high as \$450 million for the fiscal year that begins July 1, House Finance Committee Chairman Steven M. Costantino, D-Providence, yesterday urged municipalities to craft their own budgets with the understanding “that the state is facing a serious, serious deficit... I would not expect any increase in local aid, not just education aid.”

There was an uproar in May when the General Assembly approved the current budget without an increase in education aid. But local leaders likely won’t be caught by surprise this year, said Dan Beardsley, head of the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns.

“Anyone who fully understands the magnitude of that deficit surely understands why there’s not going to be any additional aid in any local aid category,” he said. “I just hope we don’t see any reduction. I’m keeping my fingers crossed that it doesn’t get to that.”

For now, Carcieri’s cost-cutting effort centers on a plan to eliminate 1,000 state jobs by June 30, 2008.

Earlier this month, he announced plans to eliminate 136 temporary workers. As recently as yesterday morning, he said he intended to lay off 414 full-fledged state employees and begin notifying them today. Yesterday evening, the number jumped to 536.

Carcieri emerged from a closed-door meeting with labor leaders to announce that 157 state workers would be laid off today, and another 379 will be notified at the same time that their jobs have been targeted for future elimination through “consolidations.” The increase surprised even labor leaders who had spent the previous hour talking to the governor about the layoff plan.

AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer George Nee said he walked away from the closed-door meeting with the understanding that only 414 people would be laid off. "I think it's safe to say right now that there's still some confusion in that area," he said.

But no one will be out of a job today.

Labor contracts allow senior employees to "bump" to another equal or lesser position. While it varies by contract, three bumps are generally allowed. Even some non-union employees are allowed one bump, according to the governor's chief of staff Brian Stern.

As for the timing of the layoff notices, a week before Thanksgiving, Carcieri said: "I'm sensitive to that, but at the end of the day we need to get this done by the end of this fiscal year. It's going to be very difficult. With all the bumping in the contracts it's going to take months and months to get that done, so we just have to start."

Asked what Carcieri will do if the Assembly rejects his not-yet announced consolidation plans, his spokesman Jeff Neal said, "I believe there are a number of areas where consolidation can occur without General Assembly action." He did not elaborate.

Meanwhile yesterday, the governor again went on talk radio to disclose other pieces in his cost-cutting plan, in this case making unspecified cuts in "welfare" programs on the assumption "the churches and philanthropic communities" will "step forward."

While he did not go into detail, Carcieri indicated he would try a second time to convince lawmakers to cut in half, from 60 months to 30, the time limit for receiving financial aid from the Family Independence Program, and also to reduce state costs for subsidized childcare.

"Given the magnitude of what we are facing right now, we are going to have to go back to a lot of the welfare areas, things that I've tried to do in the past," he said. "Last year, for example, childcare ..." WPRO talk show host John DePetro cut him off to go to a traffic report, and then led him in another direction when they returned.

But a few minutes later, Carcieri returned to the theme. "I think the magnitude of the problem we are facing right now, I think, means that in many areas we are going to have to sit down, meet with the churches and the philanthropic community and say, look you know the state government just can't keep doing some of these things ... and they are going to have to step up their efforts to support where the needs are the greatest.

"By the way," Carcieri said. "I think that's the more efficient way to do it, frankly, because I think they are more careful about how they spend their money and hold more accountability, unfortunately, than often when these things become state programs."

DePetro is both the brother of the GOP's communications director, Donna Perry, and an activist in his own right who served as master of ceremonies for the launch of former Cranston Republican Mayor Steve Laffey's mayoral and U.S. Senate campaigns. On the

subject of raising taxes, DePetro said to Carcieri: “I want to be very clear that is not on your agenda.” Carcieri concurred.

But Kate Brewster, director of the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College, was “blown away” by Carcieri’s comments. “Churches cannot replace the role of government in providing training and supports like childcare that low-skilled and low-wage families need to succeed in the work force,” she said.

Added Lucie Burdick, president of the union representing about 400 social-service employees at the Department of Human Services alone: “There are people who will not get help.” Likening Carcieri’s assumption that community groups will help out to the failed notion of “poor houses,” she said some people “weren’t helped because they didn’t fit into that particular church’s idea of someone who might be salvageable.”

Asked what programs specifically the governor was talking about cutting, Carcieri’s spokesman Jeff Neal said: “I will not be expanding on the governor’s comments.”

Later, however, at an impromptu news conference outside his office, Carcieri acknowledged, in response to questions, that he is looking again at cutting the time-limit for welfare payments in half while lowering the income-ceiling for childcare from 180 percent to 150 percent of the federal poverty level. That would mean the income cutoff for a family of three would drop from \$30,906 to \$25,755 if the tighter eligibility standard took effect this year.

Asked yesterday why the number of jobs targeted for elimination seemed to grow overnight, he said: “It was never a fixed number. We’re trying to get to what I said ... reorganizing, restructuring the way we are doing things in state government ... so that number, it’s changed daily.”

Just before Carcieri welcomed union leaders into his office for a private briefing on his layoff plans yesterday, Burdick, the president of Local 580 of the Service Employees International Union, vented her frustration at the Carcieri administration’s perception of “the role” of unions. “We understand that we aren’t part of an evil empire. We represent hard-working people who have a right to a paycheck and have a right to contractual obligations being followed. I think that some governors understood that and they worked with people in order to successfully operate the government. He is having difficulty, I think, understanding our role.”

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