

Letter to the Editor

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Human Services Budget Needs to be Maintained

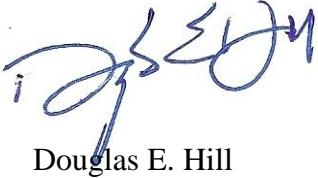
In recent days, those reacting to Governor Corbett's proposed cuts to higher education funding have commonly expressed a misinformed view that funds could be found in the state's Department of Public Welfare (DPW) budget. This opinion is wrong on several points. First, the apparent increase the Governor has earmarked for the DPW budget is illusory; in fact, the overall dollar increase for that agency does not translate in any way to funding gains (most programs actually decrease). It is instead a product of increased demand in economically challenging times coupled with, simply put, a change in bookkeeping.

Second, the DPW budget is not nameless and faceless "welfare." The largest part of its budget comprises programs serving abused and neglected children, the developmentally challenged, behavioral health, and support of senior citizens. These programs are the safety net for our families, friends, and neighbors. Over the last eight years this net has been cut repeatedly, long before the current budget crisis. It has been stretched and creatively woven with federal, state and local dollars to try to meet the basic needs of service recipients without overburdening other taxpayers. But more and more local dollars – property tax dollars – are being used to backfill the holes created by these state and federal cuts.

Third, these services are mandates that counties provide and administer on behalf of state and federal government. They serve populations and individuals that our local citizens believe need support from the community. That said, counties recognize their responsibility to do so in a cost effective way, and are actively working with the new Administration on delivery systems encompassing block grants, privatization, and other administrative models that will help counties provide these services with less state regulatory overhead and increased local flexibility. But administrative overhead is a very small part of these programs.

Governor Corbett has proposed a responsible budget that balances these much-needed local services against the reality of our fiscal situation. For human services programs his proposal does

not represent an increase; most counties would characterize it only as sustainable, and still fraught with difficult choices. Any consideration of a funding reduction below the Governor's proposal will be a disservice to our communities, our property tax payers, and our most vulnerable population.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'D. Hill', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Douglas E. Hill

The author is Executive Director of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, a non-profit, non-partisan association representing all of the Commonwealth's 67 counties.