

What's in A Budget, and What Does It Say about Us?

by Deborah Nebel

Ohio's budget process is now in full swing. Not yet understanding all the details, and not wanting to cast aspersions on the motivations of those recently swept into power, I have no intention of discussing the specifics of what has been proposed and will save that for a later time.

Rather, I would like to shift the discussion to the following questions. What should be the role of government in a democratic society, and what constitutes good stewardship of our public dollars? To put it more directly, why should those of us in the non-profit world and ordinary taxpayers like you and me care about how our government spends our public dollars? And more personally, how does the budget--our collective spending plan--work for the good of all? How does the budget, and the laws and public policy that support it, reflect my values and priorities?

While we probably will not answer these questions the same way, it is apparent that a budget reflects the drafters' priorities and demonstrates clearly what services, programs, and supports we are willing to provide collectively to residents.

I recently heard a provider advocate remark that he had been told on the QT to keep a low profile, to avoid drawing attention to a specific population or service area, because it was not being targeted for budget cuts. In some ways self-preservation--keeping what one has--is a natural reaction. And in many ways, those of us in health and human services have allowed ourselves to be reduced to sighs of relief when we have been spared, and when cuts are proposed, to frantic reactions as we try to justify the restoration of our funding, often at the expense of another social-service provider. This is business as usual.

However, I believe that those of us who care about the overall contribution of health and human services, especially those services provided through the non-profit sector, must rethink our traditional response. The questions raised above need to be discussed in our board rooms, at our staff meetings, with our consumers and their families, and with the general public. We all have a stake in this, and we risk much by sitting on the sidelines and not engaging in the discussion.

The University of Cincinnati recently released the results of a survey that measured our new governor's approval rating and asked Ohioans how they would deal with the state's budget problems. The survey showed that "most Ohioans would like to see a combination of tax

increases and cuts to balance the state budget.” The governor has gone on record to say he will not support tax increases, so he will need to rely on other means to reach equilibrium between revenue and spending. Ultimately, it is the voters who will have the final word on whether the governor’s budget and what emerges from the legislative process represents a balanced approach to the financial problems facing Ohioans and our local and state governments. Was the pain and responsibility truly shared? How do you want your hard-earned tax dollars to be spent in times of economic recession? What should be Ohio’s budget priorities and tax policies?

As LEAP’s Director of Public Policy, I have worked to include the issues of adequate revenue and government spending priorities in LEAP’s 2011 advocacy priorities. These priorities guide and shape LEAP’s agenda and work plan. Both are important public policy issues, especially in the field of disability services, where the majority of our consumers live in poverty, face numerous barriers, and lack opportunity. As an agency, we know that people in this country do not agree on the question of whether a democratic government has a responsibility to invest in its people by meeting basic human needs. But we also know that the people we serve at LEAP and the LEAP staff will directly feel the impact of cuts to the services and supports that enable persons with disabilities to have the same opportunity that most of us enjoy—living in the place of their choosing with the services and supports necessary to promote independence, self-sufficiency, and community living.

Doing the work that we do, we understand the problems and difficulties our consumers face, and we are committed to finding individual solutions for the persons with disabilities we are privileged to serve. But these times require collaboration with others who share our perspective. By working together, we can address the systemic issues that get played out in a budget bill so that all benefit from the public policy decisions and funding priorities that our elected officials make.

So join the discussion, and by all means, get involved!

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