

Public education, transit, health care targeted in Pennsylvania budget cuts

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Public and higher education, health care, libraries, mass transportation are among the programs that are targeted for cuts under Pennsylvania governor Tom Corbett's \$27 billion budget proposed last week.

For the second year in a row, public and higher education were hit with multimillion-dollar cuts from the Corbett administration, which is forcing school districts throughout the state to lay off teachers, cut programs and close schools.

This year's budget, which goes into effect July 1, 2012, through June 30, 2013, allots \$9.567 billion for basic education, a \$422 million cut from the 2010-2011 budget on top of the \$765 million cut from last year's budget.

School districts throughout the state laid off thousands of teachers, and scores of schools have been closed. Full-day kindergarten has been cut along with Head Start and preschool programs. Extracurricular activities along with music, art and foreign languages have taken the largest cuts, but core subjects such as math, science and language arts have also been cut.

More than a dozen school districts have been listed as financially distressed and several may be forced to completely shut down. Teachers in the Upper Chester School district have been working without pay, and the entire district may close as soon as the end of this month.

The cuts are especially hitting poorer school districts, as the Corbett administration has ended a funding formula that provided additional funds for school districts where there was a greater percentage of low-income people living. As a result, many of the poorest school districts are losing more than \$500 per student while wealthier districts are seeing much smaller cuts.

The state system of higher education is also getting another round of massive cuts. The new budget will cut

the funds for higher education by \$219.2 million, bringing the two-year cut to more than half a billion dollars, or down 35 percent from 2010-2011 funding levels.

Last fall, students saw their tuition bills increase by 5.5 to 9.9 percent, depending upon which of the state schools they attended. These new cuts will ensure additional tuition hikes this year along with program cuts.

In addition to cuts for the universities, the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA), which provides grants to low-income and working class students, has been cut by an additional \$27.3 million, bringing its total two-year cuts to more than \$45 million, or more than 10 percent of its budget.

Health services and welfare are also being cut. The health budget has been cut by 6 percent. As one of his first acts upon taking office last year, Governor Corbett canceled a health insurance program for low-income uninsured adults. The program served about 45,000 people, with another 200,000 on the waiting list.

During the past year, more than 130,000 people, one third of them children, have been cut from the Medicaid rolls by the state administration. The Department of Public Welfare instituted a requirement that all Medicaid recipients had to be recertified. Already overburdened caseworkers were inundated with mountains of paperwork, and many reported that boxes of files were lost and others never entered into the system, causing recipients to be cut off benefits.

The DPW has also instituted a new rule that forces tens of thousands to use up any savings they might have or be cut off food stamps.

The new budget also combines a number of fund allocations into block grants to the counties. In this way, decisions on which programs to cut are relegated

to the county governments.

Community and Economic Development and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) have been cut by 30 and 35 percent, respectively. Grants to the Community and Economic Development, which are used primarily for various building projects throughout the state, have been cut by \$92 million over the past two years.

The budget for the DCNR, which runs the state's parks, has been cut by 35 percent, falling from over \$80 million in 2010 to just over \$52 million. The cuts to the DCNR are driven by the Corbett administration's support for expansion of natural gas drilling.

No funding was provided for mass transit. Many public transit systems, such as in Pittsburgh, face massive cuts due to lack of funding from the state. The Port Authority of Allegheny County is proposing a 35 percent cut in service that goes into effect in September without the state funding. Corbett has said that he is "not going to go into" transit cut solutions for now.

All the cuts target the working class, the poor, the elderly and children. The Corbett administration has continued its policy of not raising taxes on the wealthy. No taxes have been imposed on the gas drilling industry, leaving Pennsylvania as the only state in the country with natural gas drilling that does not tax the drilling companies.



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