

King County, Washington, budget proposes layoffs and deep cuts to social services

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3 October 2014

King County, Washington, released its proposed \$8.9 billion 2015-2016 biennial budget late last month, announcing deep cuts to the county's general fund, social services, and public health programs. The county, which is home to Seattle, the state's largest city, is also planning to "eliminate more than 500 full-time positions, perhaps the largest workforce reduction in County history," according to the budget.

The largest area to see cuts will be the county's public health department and public transportation services. The former, known as Public Health of Seattle and King County, will see an almost 10 percent cut in its budget, leading to clinic closures, discontinued services—such as testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases—and layoffs.

The county is projecting the health department to run an \$8.9 million deficit by the end of this year if "reforms" are not implemented. This deficit is expected to grow to \$29 million by the end of 2016 if the proposed cuts to the budget are not adopted. If adopted and implemented, Dow Constantine, King County executive, anticipates the public health fund deficit to be reduced to \$2.5 million by the end of 2014, while eventually getting out of the red by the end of 2016.

Constantine attributed some of the proposed cuts to decisions made at both the federal and state level. "There have been federal and state cuts to public health over the years and this past year that have caused us to really have to make significant reductions to the services provided by public health," the King County executive told the *Puget Sound Business Journal*.

While King County's public transportation fund will remain relatively unaltered in nominal terms, when taking into account cost-of-living adjustments for workers and inflation, the \$1.35 billion budget will ultimately translate to a loss of some 400,000 service

hours—an 11 percent reduction in services. Bus routes will be scaled back and, in some cases, completely eliminated.

In an interview with the *Business Journal*, Dwight Dively, budget director for King County, blamed the financial woes of the county on a lack of tax revenues. Many retail centers and workplaces that generate sales tax within the county have been incorporated into cities, meaning less of that tax revenue makes its way into the county general fund.

In addition, Dively points out, the county has seen somewhat of a lifestyle change by many of its younger residents. "A good example of that," Dively said, "is, a lot of younger people now, particularly here in Seattle, are choosing lifestyles where they don't own a car, they have a smaller apartment or condo or house, they don't buy as much furniture and appliances."

Young workers saddled with high levels of student debt have, as can be expected, altered their spending habits and way of life. In other words, many individuals, despite having a job, find themselves with less and less disposable income as wages decrease and their cost of living increases. Thus, while the unemployment rate in King County remains at just below 5 percent, and the local Seattle economy is hailed as "booming," county officials use the claim that tax revenues remain low, and cuts are ultimately required.

The repeated lie that there is "no money" for vital social services and necessary public health programs, which has been utilized over the years by both the Democrats and the Republicans to impose cuts at the federal and state levels, now finds expression in King County. Despite having a relatively low unemployment rate of 4.7 percent, along with a steadily growing population, the demand for cuts remains. This at a time

when corporations are sitting on hoards of cash as profits rise, and the stock market is reaching new heights from the flow of cheap credit into financial markets.



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