

York, Pennsylvania: Social service and education cuts hit workers and students

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Cuts to public education and social programs have had a particularly hard impact on York, Pennsylvania. Six years into the supposed economic recovery, the city's residents still face double-digit unemployment and record poverty as layoffs and factory closures continue.

Located in central Pennsylvania, about 30 miles from the state capital of Harrisburg, York has a population of 44,000. In 2013, the official unemployment rate was 13 percent, more than twice the state average of 5.6 percent.

Over 37 percent of all city residents, or more than one in three, live in poverty, and the childhood poverty rate is 51 percent. Median household income is slightly more than \$30,000, and per capita income is about \$15,000.

Social services in Pennsylvania have been privatized or contracted out to various service providers. This model has always meant that vital services decline as agencies, even non-profits, are forced to cut programs and their employees' pay to help them compete for various grants.

Dana Spangler, a social worker since 1999, has been out of work for six months. She worked for many different agencies providing a variety of services, from mental health for the homeless to afterschool programs for girls.

"I am an unemployed social worker," she said. "I was working for a non-profit agency, and their grants ran out. Nobody is hiring, and every agency is in the same situation: the grants have all been cut.

"I have worked with all kinds of people—mental health, homeless, drug abuse, victims of rape and abuse, both victims and perpetrators of all kinds of crime.

"When you work for non-profits, you usually move

around a lot. A grant runs out at one agency, and you take a job with another. You are also always looking for better jobs, maybe they pay a little more or have better benefits."

Spangler added, "But since [former governor] Corbett made the cuts to human services, the grants to the agencies have all been cut. Corbett especially cut the mental health funding. Instead of helping people, they are just ending up in jail. It costs them \$75 a day to keep someone locked up, so they think it is cheaper to lock them up than to help them.

"There are no homeless programs in York. There are a few drug rehab programs, more male than female facilities. We have a big homeless problem, and they just end up in jail." This is a national epidemic, with hundreds of thousands of those in prison or in the criminal justice system either homeless, suffering from mental health problems, or both.

"People have lost cash assistance," Spangler continued. "I am trying to tell them how to make \$150 in food stamps last all month, which just can't be done. Now they are arresting people who have disabilities, and there is no one helping them. It is just awful.

"There aren't many jobs in York. They say you can work in Wendy's, but you can't support yourself or your family on the minimum wage. That is ridiculous."

York schools have also been the subject to massive budget cuts, from when previous governor Tom Corbett, a Republican, cut billions from public education statewide. Millions of dollars in funding cuts to York schools translated to more than \$1,000 lost per student. The cuts forced the school district to lay off teachers and eliminate many classes and programs.

Pennsylvania is the most unequal of any state in the country when it comes to funding public education, with poorer school districts spending 33 percent less

than wealthy ones.

In 2012, Corbett placed York schools under receivership in order to have the entire district handed over to a for-profit charter school company.

The newly elected governor, Tom Wolf, a Democrat, opposed the privatization plan to gain the support of the teachers unions in cutting pensions, but has made no attempt to restore the drastic cuts to the classrooms.

Aleesa Shue, 21, has three children. “The schools here are horrible,” she said. “My kids are never going to go to city schools. My mom used to be a teacher, and she used to buy books for her class because the school wouldn’t. The textbooks are from the 1990s, but they would rather spend half a million on a new sports stadium and not put updated books in the classrooms.”

In addition to the state cuts to education, York already has one of the highest property tax rates in the state. Federal cuts to Title 1 and Special Education have also hurt the district. These programs were cut by 12 and 11 percent, respectively, between 2010 and 2013. Anti-poverty programs also faced deep cuts.

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Aleesa works at Dollar General: “My job is OK, but it is just a lot of work for very little pay. I make just 25 cents above minimum wage, but it is better than working at McDonald’s.”

“I was jobless for a year and it sucked because I have been working since I was 14,” Aleesa said. “I never had a problem finding a job until now. I was hired in November and started working in December. Now they want to promote me to shift manager, but it is a lot more paperwork for only \$1.25 more an hour.

“I work part-time, we get about 30 hours a week. If it wasn’t for my boyfriend, this would be really bad.”

Robert Jukes is an unemployed laborer who suffers from many health issues: “I need a job. I used to do a bunch of physical labor. Now my body has gone to crap. I’ve been out of work for six months and if it wasn’t for a friend of mine, I would be homeless.”

“I am not like a 17-year-old kid,” Jukes said. “I am 50 years old. I have bills, and minimum wage is not going to pay rent, gas, electric and phone. I am also not going to work, just to pay bills and make someone else rich. I want to be able to go out to dinner or to a movie and enjoy life, too.

“I have high blood pressure, but they gave me the

wrong medicine and now I have kidney problems. I take it in stride, but it makes it harder to find a job.

“I mainly did construction labor. I am pretty much a jack-of-all-trades but a master of none. I’ve been out of work for six months, but they say I am ready to go back to work. I don’t have transportation, so I have to work for Labor Ready. You get paid the minimum wage, when they take taxes and transportation costs you make maybe \$50 for a full day’s work. If you work every day, you make \$250 a week.

“There are too many homeless people in York. The mayor doesn’t care. All he cares about is making Market and George Streets look good for the tourists, but the rest of the city gets nothing and looks like crap.”



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