

Pennsylvania budget prepares attacks on social programs, teachers, state workers

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With only a few weeks left before Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf reveals his 2017-2018 budget proposal, he has begun attacking social programs to offset a badly swelling budget deficit, topping \$600 million this fiscal year and structurally at \$2 billion. Top on the list for cuts are state workers, education and social services.

Just before Christmas the Democratic Wolf administration laid off nearly 600 workers at the state's unemployment centers following the refusal of the state Senate, citing the growing deficit, to approve \$57.5 million to fund the employees.

The budget debt stems from lower-than-expected tax revenue on sales-based items such as alcohol and cigarettes and one-time revenue fixers. The Pennsylvania economy has been stagnating, with unemployment higher than the national average.

At the end of last year, Wolf announced that thousands of vacant state jobs would not be filled. In the New Year, the administration is set to close two state prisons, citing the budget deficit and a declining inmate population, affecting about 800 staff and 2,500 inmates. Moreover, halfway houses will be reduced from 3,000 beds to 1,500, producing \$40 million in savings.

The closures will place the already overcrowded prison system at 92 percent capacity overall, with individual prisons exceeding that amount. Andy Hoover of the American Civil Liberties Union noted concern that overcrowding might be a persistent problem when these inmates are transferred to other prisons: "If it's happening to cut costs and you're doing it to jam people into prisons that are already at capacity, then that could be problematic."

Corrections Secretary John Wetzel is also exploring the possibility that these two prison buildings might

make the state money by being of use to the Trump administration's plan to round up immigrants and deport them en masse. In this case, the prison sites would act as arbitrary and inhumane holding pens, creating conditions like those that sparked last summer's hunger strike by immigrant families in Berks County, Pennsylvania. (See Immigrant mothers stage hunger strike in Pennsylvania) Quoted on WITF public radio for central Pennsylvania, Wetzel said, "If [Trump's] going to ramp that up, then he's going to need capacity quickly."

Mental health facilities have also been placed on the chopping block. Wolf said earlier this month that he will close the Hamburg State Center in Berks County and a portion of Norristown State Hospital in Montgomery County, anticipating savings of \$39 million in annual operating costs. Seven-hundred-thirty-four workers will be losing their jobs, with no guarantee of another job or one with the same pay and benefits.

For mental health patients, the shuttering will only degrade care and postpone treatment. Patients who have committed a crime sometimes languish in prison until an opening at a mental health facility. For instance, Travis Kutz had been imprisoned since May 2015 for breaking into his father's home to pilfer food. Psychiatric reports describe him as delusional, and he hears voices. Not until 18 months later was he transferred to Norristown State Hospital to undergo treatment. Private facilities have also been suffering shortages of beds.

Wolf is also working on a scheme to cut the care of the most expensive Medicaid patients, including those in nursing homes.

New expenses this year are only adding to the state government's problems, such as payments to a school-

construction bond and funding for Growing Greener, a program to improve water quality and open space. Growing pension debt is another financial strain coming to a head, amounting to almost \$60 billion. Last year, Republicans failed to pass a plan that would have reduced retirement benefits and placed newly hired workers into a 401(k) or hybrid plan. Wolf has admitted he supports the destruction of pensions.

The new Trump administration will also contribute to these financial difficulties. According to the Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, would add over \$1 billion to the state's structural deficit. Over 700,000 people in Pennsylvania, most of them low income or the working poor, will lose health care coverage if the ACA is dismantled.

The governor has thus far offered scant details about his upcoming budget, only saying that he will not propose raising the sales and income taxes, but will try to enact a tax on gas production in the Marcellus Shale region, which he knows has virtually no chance of passing in the legislature.

Public school officials are becoming increasingly worried about school funding in the next budget. Wolf's modest increases in school funding have done nothing to mend the damages done to public education by former governor Tom Corbett's school cuts.

The executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators, Mark DiRocco, quoted by the Associated Press, said, "No one has a magic answer, I get that. But level funding schools is not an appropriate response and it's not responsible. We need to make sure our kids get a quality education."

Last summer, a damning report about school funding showed that the general well-being of Pennsylvania's school districts is the worst ever seen in the state. (See Pennsylvania school districts face catastrophic funding crisis).



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