

Proposed Florida budget cuts to hit Holocaust survivors

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A budget proposal under consideration in the Florida Senate would slash state aid to Holocaust survivors.

The proposed cuts are part of a larger \$20 million budget cut proposed by the state's Health and Human Services Appropriations Subcommittee chairwoman, state Senator Anitere Flores. If passed, the cuts will primarily affect programs that fund medical research and give aid to the elderly.

South Florida is home to 345 Holocaust survivors, more than any other region in the US except New York City. Most of the survivors are in their nineties and are largely centered in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

The Holocaust Survivor Assistance Program is due to be eliminated altogether. This 20-year-old program provides \$92,946 annually for the funding of home aides for survivors. Some of the services the aides provide include transportation for visits to the doctor, assistance in cooking, cleaning and other chores. At a rate of \$18.50 per hour this works out to be approximately 5,000 hours a year of assistance.

If the program is cut, former beneficiaries may be forced to move into nursing homes. For survivors who continue to suffer from the psychological scars related to their experiences, the transition could have a devastating effect on their well-being.

In an interview with WPTV, Jewish Family Services President Danielle Hartmann outlined the potential consequences of the proposed cuts: "Some of the traumas affecting them during the Holocaust actually come back. So, something as simple as taking a shower for a Holocaust survivor is not a positive experience in a nursing home."

Martin Ferst, a 93-year-old survivor and widower living in Boca Raton who is provided an aide by the program, spoke to the *Sun Sentinel* about the potential cuts.

"Thanks to her, I'm surviving. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. I cannot drive, I cannot cook," Ferst said. "Without

[her], I would be lost."

Another program slated to be cut that primarily affects south Florida's Jewish population is the Jewish Family Services' Transportation Services for the Elderly and Disabled in Palm Beach County, which will see \$143,640 cut from its annual budget of \$922,000.

For 14 different clinics in the state researching Alzheimer's disease and other memory disorders, a total of \$3,119,214 is set to be cut, which breaks down to \$222,801 for each clinic.

Eight different hospitals that provide mental health services to youth will see \$6 million cut from their budgets, or \$750,000 each.

Other planned cuts include \$1 million from AIDS research at the University of Miami, \$352,746 from diabetes research and prevention, and \$200,000 from substance abuse treatment programs.

The proposed budget cuts are particularly cruel when viewed in the context of the state's overall budget. For the 2016-2017 fiscal year, the state had a budget of \$82.2 billion.

This includes nearly \$4.5 billion spent on law enforcement and corrections, including \$198 million to be spent on maintenance and repair of prisons, to handle the state's steadily expanding inmate population.

Republican Governor Rick Scott's proposed budget for 2017-2018 would further expand funding for these areas, with a proposed \$53.1 million to be spent on pay raises for state law enforcement and corrections officers. An additional \$5.8 million is to be spent on "strengthening counterterrorism operations" at the state level.

The state spent over \$1.1 billion in 2016-2017 on Scott's fraudulent "economic development" scheme, aimed at drawing businesses from other states to open up shop in Florida. This figure does not include an additional \$250 million in subsidies that the governor requested to retain the transplanted businesses. Simultaneously, the

state of Florida continues to provide a mere three months of unemployment insurance to workers who have lost their jobs, the lowest in the country.

While \$200 million is budgeted for affordable housing, an increase of \$25 million from the previous year, this figure does not reflect the fact that the state legislature has taken \$117 million from the state's affordable housing trust funds to spend elsewhere. Florida continues to have a large homeless population, along with some of the fastest growing housing prices in the country, particularly in the heavily populated southern counties.

Funding to provide medical services to low-income Floridians is to be reduced from \$1 billion to \$608 million. There are currently 567,000 uninsured citizens in the state, largely due to the governor's refusal to accept federal funds for the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. The budget for county health departments will be reduced by \$17 million from the previous year, eliminating the funding for 507 county health employees. Additionally, \$23 million will be cut from the state's children's special health care services (KidCare program).

The number of state employees who lost their jobs in 2016-2017 was 270, bringing the total number of state workers fired under the Scott administration to 8,800.

While programs that benefit the most vulnerable have been cut, wealthy business owners have been the primary beneficiaries of Scott's budgets. Taxes were reduced by \$130 million in the 2016-2017 fiscal year. According to the Florida Policy Institute, "Over the last three fiscal years, almost \$1 billion of recurring revenues have been lost because of tax law changes. Sales and corporate income taxes exemptions, reductions, and credits represent more than half of all revenues lost."

The governor has proposed an additional \$618 million in tax cuts for the 2017-2018 budget.



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