

Social services are at risk

Political courage will be required

By Shelby Tabeling

What are your deepest-held hopes for your children and grandchildren? Opportunities for successful and productive lives? That is our hope for all Tennesseans.

The Tennessee Conference on Social Welfare (TCSW) believes the 2009-10 state budget will reveal our degree of commitment to thriving families and communities, both now and for future generations. Established in 1913 to bring sorely needed services to Tennessee, in 2009 we are addressing the most drastic health- and social-services dismantling in decades.



Tabeling

TCSW holds an unshakable belief that Tennessee will rise only when proven preventive services, as well as those for people in crisis, are in place.

A snapshot of the excruciating choices before our decision-makers reveals a roller-coaster ride of devastating cuts, some full restorations, one-year restorations and further cuts and restorations on the horizon.

At the brink of legislative adjournment, we are faced with extinction or deep cuts in: ■ Early intervention services at the core of prevention, building capacities for the future.

■ Evidence-based community-based services, preserving community safety and reducing homelessness, costly incarceration and long-term institutionalization. Those include suicide prevention, peer supports and crisis services for the mentally ill, recovery services, the medically needy program, coordinated school health, services to children and special populations, supports to families of the developmentally disabled and geriatric care. Multimillion-dollar cuts in court-ordered mental health services raid resources for essential preventive programs.

Time is short on budget negotiation

Proven services given a one-year-only reprieve through stimulus funding include family resource centers, safe-schools programs, Juvenile Court prevention programs, Shaken, and home-visitation programs to improve parenting skills and prevention of child abuse.

Recent administration restorations include services for relative caregivers of children with no parental home, youth group homes and other critical services. On behalf of educators, law enforcement and Tennesseans most at risk, we express deep appreciation for the hard work by the administration and General Assembly in finding common ground. The harder work lies in what we must achieve together during the next seven days.

While TCSW applauds prudent stewardship of the \$835.6 million in state reserves, recent federal rule changes no longer require \$347 million of those. An additional state savings of nearly \$200 million during the year is estimated from TennCare enrollment changes. The \$20 million-\$33 million, depending upon priorities, needed for 2009-10 services is minuscule compared to available funding. Even the nearly twice that needed next year, if stimulus money is not available, is doable. More detailed information is at www.tcsww.org.

Yes, shortfalls and further reductions are sure to come. We believe Tennessee still can, and must, fund service cuts this year and beyond until state revenue streams are improved. In the words of Latamera Woodley, TCSW Middle Region president, "Effective government is a combination of lean overhead and a largess of proven services."

The budget is a moral document mapping our vision for the future. Your decision-makers need your support for a political will to retain intact, cost-effective systems that build stronger children and families, safer communities and a productive economic base for Tennessee.

Shelby Tabeling, MSW, is executive director of the Tennessee Conference on Social Welfare, with a mission of improving the social and economic well-being of Tennesseans, particularly those most vulnerable.