

## Mid-year cuts are a painful wakeup call

In social service circles in Westchester County, March 9 may go down as a date for the history books. That was the day that County Executive Rob Astorino announced that budget deficits could reach \$166 million next year and turn county government into "something completely different than what we have today." And with that, Astorino rattled off a list of \$16 million in cuts that would be implemented right away, not even midway through the budget year. By far the biggest share of those cuts — \$5.8 million or 36 percent of the total — will come from the Department of Social Services.

Since then, Astorino's been getting pushback from all sides — nonprofits, people who use the day care, the Board of Legislators. The weeks of protest and outcry have provided a window into how difficult it is to cut spending and alter the status quo, even at a time when taxpayers are resistant to higher taxes. The controversy also raises questions about what kinds of cuts lawmakers and the public will stomach. More to the point, are cuts in subsidies for single mothers who are struggling just to work really worth the money they save? The inquiries are useful beyond the specific dispute because these cuts clearly are just the opening act.

Indeed, in his State of the County address on Thursday, Astorino vowed to spread the cuts around and seek \$420 million in buyouts, salary cuts, furloughs and pay freezes from county employees in an effort to balance next year's anticipated \$1.9 billion budget.

### The importance of conversation

Everyone knew there would be cuts, Cora

Greenberg, executive director of the Westchester Children's Association, told the Editorial Board. After all, cutting taxes and shrinking county government were the themes of Astorino's 2009 campaign for county executive. Plus, only the hopelessly out of touch would be surprised by the financial troubles that governments (and more than a few households) are facing this year. Still, Greenberg said she didn't anticipate mid-budget-year cuts that came without warning.

"The first we heard about it was at the press conference," Greenberg said. "We think the conversation should have started before the cuts started." In a perfect world, it might have. But time for conversation was a luxury that the county executive couldn't afford, said Ned McCormack, Astorino's director of communications. The deficit Astorino inherited was far greater than he anticipated; he had to act fast, said McCormack.

The cuts to social services included \$4 million in projected savings — \$3.3 million in savings from reduced costs for foster care and \$650,000 in savings from reduced emergency housing. That money won't be taken out of the budget until the end of the year, in case the recession leads to an increased need in foster care or homeless shelters. Critics contend that savings in the foster care program might be undermined by other cuts, like the \$300,000 cut to community optional preventative service, a variety of programs run by nonprofit agencies that are designed to keep at-risk children in their homes.

But the social service cuts that got the most attention are the \$1.5 million trim to day-care spending. Astorino has reduced funding to three non-mandated day-care programs by \$500,000 each. This means working families from the lowest income brackets have now seen their day-care costs

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double since December, to 20 percent of the total cost. A similar program for those earning slightly more was capped at the number now receiving the subsidy and anyone else who qualifies will be put on a waiting list. A scholarship for families who are struggling, but earn up to \$48,000 for a family of three, has been eliminated entirely.

"Everything we do is painful," Social Service Commissioner Kevin Mahon told the Editorial Board, noting the county still has \$33 million budgeted for day care. "This is not a reduction by choice, it's a reduction by necessity. We looked at programs that were over and above what we have to do. There aren't a lot of other places to cut. A lot of other services are flat-out mandated, like Medicaid or Medicare. We have no choice, if someone walks in the door, I have to provide services."

### Quick savings, long-lasting costs

Mahon is a seasoned social services leader, not a newcomer appointed by an administration with a single-minded focus on budget-cutting. He was appointed commissioner by former County Executive Andrew Spano in 1998, and when Mahon talks about the cuts he is imposing, he sounds regretful. But Kathy Halas, executive director of the Child Care Council of Westchester, said the cuts are more than painful, they are shortsighted.

"It's really a work force development strategy, making it possible for parents to work in the expensive area we live in," Halas said. "Westchester has been a leader in child care for many years, and they have my sympathy for this budget crisis, but the case for child care, I think, takes us in the direction we want to go, to restart the economy. Without child-care assistance, some parents won't be able to work and that's an issue for employers. What you want to do is increase the investment so more people can work."

Of course, it's more than a work force issue. "The biggest opportunity you have to impact how kids are going to do lifelong is birth to age 5," Halas said.

Outside experts agree. "Education is one of those areas that's very easy to cut because the results won't be seen for a long time," said Farrokh Hormozi, an economics professor and chair of the Public Administration Program at Pace University.

"Unfortunately, you see the savings immediately so it looks like a good idea, but you don't see the costs until later."

### Work together to set priorities

The Democrats on the Board of Legislators came out swinging against the day-care cuts, holding press conferences that featured parents who were now having to balance the benefits of working against the cost of paying for child care. Ken Jenkins, the chairman of the board, questioned the county executive's right to make mid-year cuts without consulting the Board of Legislators. Though the board majority agreed with some of the mid-year budget changes — refinancing bonds, changes in the parks departments and reducing overtime — they drew the line at day-care and transportation cuts.

"We have talked to outside counsel," Jenkins told the Editorial Board. "We are trying to avoid that level of acrimony. People don't want to see us do that, and we don't want to go to court."

Voters made it clear in November that they want tax savings. The messy part — how to achieve those savings — is left to the administration and the legislature to work out. In Putnam County, the Legislature and County Executive Robert Bondi are working together to examine the many layers of overlapping government and looking for ways to consolidate in order to save taxpayer dollars. Things are going smoothly on a "listening tour," in

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which they are seeking public comment on the subject. The true test, however, will come later, when actual proposals emerge.

In Rockland, the county legislators just announced that they plan a midterm review of the budget. "I have proposed that we begin to review departments now, rather than waiting until the county executive submits his 2011 budget in late October," Harriet Cornell, Legislature chairwoman, said on Tuesday. "Starting earlier provides us with a far greater opportunity to examine the state of the county's operations and formulate plans, not only to rein in nonessential spending, but also to establish our priorities."

The mid-year cuts in Westchester are a painful wake-up call. They certainly got everyone's attention. The task at hand is to shape the future and work together to identify savings and still preserve the safety net. "I want the adults to all get together and act like adults," Greenberg said, noting that only when needs are prioritized can you decide what to fund.

"We have to get together with the community and figure out what the needs are and decide which needs we can meet. It's not as if we can meet all of the needs," she said, but it would be a "disaster" to just cut everything by 20 percent without examining the costs of the individual programs. "This is the discussion that happens all the time among social service providers, 'What's the most emergent need?' There's lot of wisdom out there, but the two-way communication is broken. It's the same circle of social service providers talking and it never reaches the policy makers."

The policy makers are likely listening this time. With all the outcry from the cuts, it would be hard for the officials to miss the discussion. If the cutting is going to continue, as seems likely, then the conversation has to become more inclusive. "We're in the early innings here," McCormack said. "In the old days, the cavalry would come to the rescue, Albany or Washington would come with a check. I don't think they are coming this time."

**The writer is associate editor of the Opinion page.**



Westchester County Executive Rob Astorino gives his first State of the County address in White Plains on Thursday. (Carucha L. Meuse/The Journal News)

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