

Florida House-proposed budget would slash nearly \$7 billion, hit health care hard

DCF Secretary Butterworth: Child services cuts 'unconscionable'

BY BILL COTTERELL • FLORIDA CAPITAL BUREAU POLITICAL EDITOR • APRIL 2, 2008

Department of Children and Families Secretary Bob Butterworth said Tuesday it is "totally unconscionable" for Florida legislators to cut medical and social services for needy children.

Hundreds of children turned out for Children's Week events as volunteers from 19 organizations set up display tables and sought out legislators in hallways bedecked with paper cutouts of about 100,000 hand prints and other children's artwork that annually adorns the three-story atrium of the Capitol.

House and Senate budget committees are finishing work on a \$3 billion reduction in general-revenue spending, forced by a shortfall in state tax collections. The House Monday released its \$65.1 billion budget plan for the fiscal year starting July 1 — a cut of nearly \$7 billion.

Butterworth, a former attorney general, said "they're cutting more than any of us ever anticipated" in health and welfare programs. He said Gov. Charlie Crist requested a \$17 million increase in transition payments for foster children "aging out" of state supervision, who can get \$1,000 a month if they work part time and learn to live on their own, but the House proposes to cut \$7 million — and 800 young adults — from the program.

Butterworth said 71 child-protection jobs would be eliminated at DCF, which had requested 200 more of those investigators. He said child neglect, drug abuse, domestic violence, unemployment and homelessness all increase when the economy gets bad, "so this is not the time to be cutting back."

Butterworth also said Crist needed 150 more employees to process food stamp, cash subsidy and Medicaid applications, but the Legislature is instead cutting 200 such positions.

Rep. Lorraine Ausley, D-Tallahassee, said primary care in county health units would lose \$65 million in the House budget and that the Healthy Start program, hospice care and Healthy Families funds would all take big hits.

"We cannot stand by and allow these types of cuts to take place," Butterworth said. "It's totally unconscionable."

Ausley said legislators ought to close sales-tax loopholes and cut off state incentive payments to pro sports teams. She also advocated a \$1-a-pack cigarette tax hike. The House leadership has ruled out any tax hikes this year, saying they would hurt the state's economic recovery in the long term.

"I'm not optimistic. I'm very concerned," said Ausley. "Part of the problem is that in the health-care area, we're going to pit young children against hospice care. That's not fair."

Organizers estimated that 1,500 attended luncheon in the courtyard for Children's Week.

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