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Nonprofit supporters: 'Save Our Services'

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DOVER — Teen mothers arrived cradling their babies who were months, if not weeks or days old.

Some senior citizens needed assistance walking to the rally point, others moved slowly on their own.

Approximately 200 Delawareans of all generations gathered at Legislative Hall to voice concerns about the looming elimination of nearly \$46 million in nonprofit funding provided through the state budget.

Loud chants of "Save Our Services" punctuated the 25-minute show of support on Thursday for a grant-in-aid bill imperiled by legislative cuts aimed at balancing Delaware's budget one day ahead of a new fiscal year.

While temperatures outside continued to rise on the early-summer day, attendees planned to turn up the heat on legislators inside as well.

Dozens of nonprofit supporters entered Legislative Hall after the noon rally ready to express their concerns to state senators and representatives before they began debating three bills aimed at generating revenue and staving off cuts at 4:30 p.m. or so.

As United States Army veteran Tom Jones — on disability and supported by the CHEER program that provides services and programs for citizens 50 and older in Sussex County — said, "We all need to tell the politicians to do the right thing, which is to preserve services for those who need it to survive."

Supporters of nonprofits rally at Legislative Hall on Thursday. (Delaware State News/Marc Clery)

Speaking to the crowd, Democrat leaders pushed the importance of three revenue producing bills still in play — personal income tax, alcohol and tobacco and cigarettes to restoring grant-in-aid.

Seemingly no less committed to grant-in-aid's impact, Republicans expressed the value of cost efficiency for running state government and the lack of Delaware-sponsored programs affected so far.

The state of flux commenced Wednesday when the Joint Finance Committee announced \$88 million in cuts that hit nonprofits and educational funding.

State Sen. Dave Lawson, R-Marydel, described the situation as "Not one of our prouder moments," but expressed hope for grant-in-aid restoration "if we do it right."

Hailed as “champion” for the “underdog” by his Democratic cohorts, Rep. John Kowalko of Newark described the cuts as “more than meanness. It’s unconscionable.

“It’s sinful to do that for people.”

Alluding to a purported agenda by President Donald Trump, Rep. Kowalko said the missing funding will “crush the middle class, crush the poor, crush the disabled.”

As the gathering dispersed, Sen. Lawson took the microphone one last time and asked “Why can’t we hold government responsible for the dollars they have, not the dollars they want.” The legislator described the cuts as a “bullying tactic” and promised “I will not buckle to this.”

‘Do the right thing’

If grant-in-aid wasn’t returned to the upcoming budget, and Mr. Jones feared legislators wouldn’t “do the right thing”, lower and fixed income, military veterans and elderly citizens were projected to suffer the most.

“Without CHEER I wouldn’t be alive today,” said the Georgetown resident, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and various physical ailments that he can’t manage without assistance.

“There are a lot of people like me who need these services.”

Kittie Carver found a spot near the front of the gathering at the back entrance to Legislative Hall and listened to nonprofit administrators plead their general case before supporters and several Democrat and Republican legislators.

Joined by several Dover-based Modern Maturity Center volunteers, Ms. Carver shuddered at the possibility of not being able to deliver nutritious support to shut-in senior citizens through daily Meals on Wheels visits to their homes.

“For many of them, we are the first person they see every day and may bring them the only meal they will eat,” Ms. Carver said.

Describing the scene as “surreal” Community in Schools of Delaware President Tim Foxx seemed perplexed by the lack of middle ground between two political parties acknowledge the importance of supporting nonprofits, but are so drastically separated on how to properly do so.

“They both seem to have put pillars deep into the ground and have established hard lines they do not want to cross,” he said.

Thus, Mr. Foxx was prepared to spend the afternoon talking with legislators on collectively finding a solution.

“I’m going to ask a lot of questions to learn whether they are truly invested in finding a solution,” he said.

Rethinking services

A complete severance of state funding would be “too much for us” according to Cate Lyons of the Modern Maturity Center. Many volunteers living on fixed incomes would be drastically challenged by a lack of mileage reimbursement for meal deliveries, among other concerns.

“We were prepared for cuts but not total elimination,” she said. “We were braced for maybe a drop of 17 percent, but this would be a tremendous setback for those we serve.”

Beverly Lawson of People's Place said "we like what we heard" about the emphasis of saving grant-in-aid and acknowledged the limitations legislators have in addressing the budget.

If the situation remained unchanged, Ms. Lawson said, "We'll definitely have to rethink how we are providing services and won't be able to provide as many. People can get along day to day, but need long-term services to survive."

In a news release Thursday morning, the Delaware Volunteer Firefighter's Association President Theodore Walius described the organization as "alarmed" by current cuts. He noted the threat to public safety through eliminated programs and services and the first responders who "have provided lifesaving services to the citizens of Delaware for a long time.

"It is a shame that the lack of agreement between the parties have caused us to be where we are today. Is this the General Assembly that goes down as the one who cut public safety? We sure hope not. ..."