

FAMILY & POLICY



AN ADVOCACY PROGRAM OF

FEBRUARY 26, 2010

Appropriations subcommittees met during the week of February 22nd to try to deal with the FY 2011 budget.

The House and Senate panels met jointly to hear from agency heads, and in some cases, from the public. Faced with the continuing budget crisis, they asked for information on how many state employees are eligible to retire, presumably seeing an opportunity for savings through personnel reductions. Members also took the opportunity to raise other issues.

The **Human Services Subcommittees** asked Commissioner Shelp of the Dept. of Behavioral Health and

Developmental Disabilities if he thought [HB 1040](#) (Pruitt, 144th) would help move people out of institutions and into the community more rapidly. (HB 1040 allows certain nursing tasks to be performed by trained workers who are not nurses.) Com. Shelp replied that he could not say it would speed the move, but that he thought it would help sustain people who do move into the community without introducing harm or risk. Subcommittee members also questioned Dept. of Human Services Com. Walker about items in her budget such as the SHINES computer system contract. They were especially concerned about the impact of the loss of 137 eligibility workers (out of about 2,000) at a time when the number of applications for food stamps and Medicaid is extremely high because of the bad economy. Com. Walker says workers focus more on being accurate so as not to incur a federal error rate penalty rather than on trying to make timely eligibility decisions. House subcommittee chair Houston asked Com. Walker for a budget plan that would avoid eliminating the eligibility worker positions.

The House-Senate **Health Subcommittees** heard details of the Medicaid, PeachCare and State Health Benefit Plan budgets from Dept. of Community Health Com. Medows. DCH's budget is built partly on proceeds from the Governor's proposed hospital tax which has attracted

opposition. Rep. Pat Gardner asked how much the state pays PSI, the vendor that determines PeachCare eligibility and collects monthly premiums (\$19.8 M). She asked whether it is wise to continue having separate entities decide eligibility for Medicaid and for PeachCare when children's applications too often get bounced between the

two. Com. Medows agreed that it would make sense to have Medicaid and PeachCare eligibility determinations joined and said she would like to see families be able to apply through kiosks or the health departments. She thought it would take investment in web-based

resources. House subcommittee chairman Channell asked Rep. Gardner to follow up. The Health subcommittees held a three-hour public hearing on 2/25. Many organizations urged legislators to find ways to avert cuts to health care provider payments, health departments and other services, and/or to forego the proposed hospital tax. They encouraged lawmakers instead to enact a higher tobacco tax, which could raise \$300-\$400 M, and to consider other ways of getting the necessary revenues.

The Senate Education and Youth Committee will hear bills on discipline of children who bring weapons to school. The committee will meet Tuesday, March 2nd, at 10:00 a.m., Room 307 CLOB. The agenda includes [SB 299](#) and [SB 332](#) (Jones, 10th). SB 299 makes changes related to the zero tolerance policy, and SB332 requires boards of education to report statistics annually, by school, on disciplinary proceedings against students.

The Budget transparency bill passed unanimously by the Senate is still in House Rules. [SB 206](#) (Goggans, 7th), requiring creation of a "tax expenditure budget" showing the cost to the state of special tax breaks, was amended and favorably reported by the House Appropriations Committee, but is still awaiting approval of the Rules Committee for a vote by the full House.

Highlights

- Joint House-Senate Appropriations subcommittees met during the week on the FY 2011 budget.
- The General Assembly will remain in recess until March 8th for further work on the budget.

You can help!

Locate your State Representative and Senator: www.votesmart.org (Check your driver's license for 9-digit zip code.)

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