

## **Worcester Telegram & Gazette (MA)**

### **Repairing Massachusetts' safety net rates top priority**

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COLUMN: AS I SEE IT

Despite an improving economic climate, the governor and Legislature are preparing for another round of bruising budget debates. The problem is there is no effort being made to restore funds to the social service safety net that was so badly damaged during the last round of budget cuts and may be weakened further still. This is a matter of concern to members of United Service Executives, an association of the executive directors of the 38 agencies funded by the United Way of Central Massachusetts.

Many of these agencies receive contracts from the state to provide specialized services to individuals and families that struggle to provide for themselves. Our programs help people of all ages. We assist new families and those who are caring for elderly, ill or disabled friends and relatives.

We provide food and shelter, employment training, health care, mental health services for children, substance abuse treatment and services that maintain frail elders in their homes. We also offer programs that protect children and elders from abuse, prevent teen pregnancy and AIDS and assist individuals with disabilities who lead active, productive lives.

Many of these essential services have been hurt by cuts in state funding; the damage will be irreparable if we continue to balance the budget on the backs of human service agencies.

Nonprofit social services organizations are part of the solution and essential to the people of Central Massachusetts. Our agencies not only improve the lives of our clients but we help drive the economic engine of Central Massachusetts. Our 38 private nonprofit agencies control collective revenues of \$225 million. This money stays in the community as salaries, taxes and payments for local goods and services.

As a group, we employ 3,285 people, utilize the talent of over 700 dedicated board members and mobilize thousands of volunteers who care deeply about the quality of life here. And we represent just 38 members of a much larger human service sector. According to last year's report, "Return on Investment: The Economic and Social Impact of the Non-Profit Sector in

Worcester County," the human service sector in Central Massachusetts consisted of 640 organizations, employing more workers than companies producing abrasive products and plastics combined and more workers than our 15 institutions of higher education. We create many entry-level jobs that stay in the community. We work in, and help turn around, economically distressed areas that commercial ventures view as undesirable.

How were social services in Central Massachusetts impacted by last year's budget cuts? Collectively the USE agencies lost \$9 million. These losses forced several programs to close, while others had to curtail services. These recent cuts followed years of level funding, in which commonwealth support did not increase to keep pace with the rising the cost of providing services. Our agencies have made up the difference by draining other limited resources. We cannot sustain additional state cuts and still serve our community.

Prevention services have been among the programs hardest hit. We have seen drastic reductions in funding for AIDS prevention, teen pregnancy prevention and child abuse protection. This approach is both shortsighted and disingenuous.

Take AIDS prevention as an example. The number of cases is rising, while the commonwealth cuts funding for education and prevention. For example, the commonwealth cut funding for AIDS education and prevention programs.

Although AIDS no longer results in certain fatality, perpetual and expensive treatments are necessary to prolong life. We can pay a little now, or pay much more later. And that's just the dollar cost. What about the human cost of failing to prevent this dreadful disease? The fastest growing AIDS populations are people ages 13-24, including college students, and men and women over age 50. These are people we know, family members, friends, business associates.

The American economy thrives on both the entrepreneurial spirit and on philanthropy, which is defined as an activity or institution intended to promote human welfare. Philanthropy is often viewed in terms of charitable contributions, but it is exhibited when our tax dollars are used for the common good.

State money spent on social services helps maintain the safety of those made vulnerable by illness, age, disability or circumstance. You know the children, the families, the senior citizens in Central Massachusetts who have been helped by our programs, and who are affected by state cuts in funding social services.

Some politicians are fond of justifying budget cuts as "eliminating fat." Further cuts to state funded social services more closely resembles an anorectic willing to sacrifice muscle and healthy functioning in the service of eliminating misperceived "fat." The public can no longer accept the delusion that "no harm is being done." Those who are being harmed are those who have the least financial and personal resources to endure further disappointment and hardship.

Stephen **Slaten** is executive director of Jewish Family Service of Worcester. Also contributing to this article were Alicia Lenahan of CASA Project, Karen Ludington of Children's Friend, Orlando Rodriguez of Centro Las Americas, Edla Ann Bloom of AIDS Project Worcester, Edward P. Madaus of Guild of St. Agnes of Worcester and Frances M. Anthes of Family Health Center of Worcester.