



WSLC Legislative Update

JANUARY 15, 2010

VOL. XXV — No. 2

A weekly report from the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO



Decisive perhaps, but not compassionate

Families, advocates of developmentally disabled plead to save state institutions

OLYMPIA—This week, Gov. Chris Gregoire delivered her State of the State address and by our count, she mentioned "struggling families" or "unemployed families" 16 times. And with each successive issue that she discussed, including the projected \$2.6 billion revenue shortfall, she repeatedly concluded: "Let's provide the decisive, compassionate leadership Washingtonians want and deserve."

Contrast this message to that of the Republican caucus: that government must set aside considerations like "compassion" and make the same tough budget cuts just as struggling families are having to do with their pocketbooks.

"I've faced financial hardship, but I've never balanced my budget by throwing my kids out of the house," testified one citizen at a Senate Ways and Means Committee hearing this week. (Hat tip to our Facebook friend Sen. Eric Oemig (D-Kirkland) for reporting that gem.)

Unfortunately, the governor's supplemental budget proposes to do just that. It would close institutions for developmentally disabled children and adults, essentially kicking some of our most vulnerable people out of the state's house. Plus, it would cost more money—now and in the future.

On the chopping block are two residential habilitation centers (RHCs), the Frances Haddon Morgan Center in Bremerton and the Rainier School in Buckley. These are state-run homes for some of the most severely mentally disabled children and adults in our state.

For starters, these closures will cost \$1.8 million in the first year, at a time we are desperate to cut costs. But even worse, the private consultants who claim these closures will save the state money in the long run never identified the costs "to pro-

vide comparable care in the community," said Sola Rayner, a member of Washington Federation of State Employees Local 1221 and one of several advocates for RHCs who took a day off work to come to Olympia and oppose the closures. The governor's plan relies on moving residents to a non-existent provider network that consultants said would require "substantial refinancing" to create, Rayner said.

The cost is likely to be a lot more than \$1.8 million, in money and lives. The WFSE reports that the downsizing of Fircrest School in 2003 that moved 61 residents cost \$10 million—and six lives. With 370 at Rainier School and more than 50 at the Morgan Center, Rayner asked: "How much is it going to cost to move over 400 people?"



Angie is a 30-year resident of the Rainier School in Buckley.

WFSE members were joined by the families of RHC residents like Paul Strand, whose son Eric lives at the Morgan Center. He said officials advocating for closure have an outdated view of institutions and don't understand the stable homelike atmosphere they have, which is critical for people with severe autism and other disabilities. Strand told *The Kitsap Sun* that he worries homes run by for-profit companies would hire less experienced caretakers. He said a similar move in Oregon led to patient deaths.

"They don't understand change," he said of the residents. "They just have to be taken care of. You can't take care of people for profit."

Reflecting back on Gregoire's State of the State mantra, closing these RHCs might be decisive. But compassionate?

This is exactly the kind of unacceptable budget cut that the governor and legislative leaders should "buy back" by increasing state revenues. Unfortunately, preventing the closures of these RHCs, and the proposed closures of other critical state institutions like the Ahtanum View Corrections Center in

(CONTINUED ON BACK)

(CONTINUED FROM FRONT)

Yakima and Pine Lodge Corrections Center for Women in Medical Lake, did not appear in Gregoire's "Book 2" budget list of programs and services she would like to buy back with federal money and the closure of some tax loopholes.

The Washington State Labor Council strongly urges Democratic legislative leaders to find the revenue needed to keep these institutions open. That would truly be "decisive, compassionate leadership."

Privatized liquor stores: Enough said

On Thursday, the Senate Labor, Commerce and Consumer Protection Committee heard SB 5729, which would privatize the state's liquor stores. The bill's sponsor, Sen. Tim Sheldon's ("D"-Potlatch), noted that he's now been in the Legislature for 20 years and has been introducing this bill since 1998, and this is the first hearing it's ever had.

"Bet you didn't expect that from me," quipped Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles, the committee's chair. She granted the hearing but opposes the bill, so it's unlikely to advance.

It's no joke that the false promises of privatization have taken such a hold in Olympia that ideas like this—long dismissed as harmful to our communities, to family-wage jobs, and to state revenue—are suddenly worthy of hearing. Despair at the depth of the budget crisis has driven some Democratic lawmakers to reconsider the anti-government ideology that considers public programs and services to be wasteful and inefficient. The same twisted ideology would have us believe that the private sector can do everything cheaper and better.

It's not true and there is evidence all around us. Introducing the profit motive into public services is a recipe for bad jobs, low wages and continued costs to supervise and regulate private contractors. Ultimately, it's a recipe for significantly higher costs after the state dismantles public infrastructure and initially lowballing contractors suddenly jack up their prices because the state can no longer provide that service.

Our state-run liquor stores safely returned \$332 million to fund essential state and local services in 2009. We say "safely" because Washington's liquor store clerks and managers—represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers union and earning family wages and benefits—have the best record in the nation at preventing the sale of liquor to minors. The compliance rate in Washington is 94%, while private sector compliance ranges from 76% to 84%. There is no incentive for these state employees to aggressively sell. Plus they have decent-paying jobs that promote employee longevity and experience, whereas a minimum wage clerk at Eddie's Discount Liquors can always find another crappy job if he gets popped for selling to minors.

Most importantly, given everyone's stated focus (including ours) on creating and maintaining good jobs to get us past this recession and the short timelines of this legislative session,

WSLC Legislative Conference will be Feb. 11

Leaders, staffers and rank-and-file members of all WSLC-affiliated unions are invited to get a progress report on our legislative agenda at the Washington State Labor Council's 2010 Legislative Conference, from 8:30 a.m. to lunchtime on Thursday, Feb. 11 at the Olympia Red Lion Hotel. As always, there will be a reception from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. the preceding evening, Wednesday, Feb. 10, at the hotel with legislators and other state officials in attendance. The registration fee, including materials, lunch and one admission to the reception, is \$50. For details, including registration forms, go to www.wslc.org.

why would we waste one more minute considering whether we should cut another 1,000 good jobs in Washington replace them with low-wage, no-benefit jobs that place public safety at risk?

Privatized workers' comp: What's that smell?

AIG. It's not just America's favorite taxpayer-bailed-out, corporate-executive-overcompensating, claim-denying, piece-of-crap insurance company. It's also the nation's No. 1 underwriter of private workers' compensation coverage. And for the past year, AIG, Liberty Mutual and the rest of the industry have been positioning to run an initiative to privatize Washington's workers' compensation system.

Part of that campaign is to undermine public confidence in our system by lying about it. The next part is to have their Republican advocates in Olympia introduce a bill destined to go nowhere so they can say, "The Legislature wouldn't act."

Well, it's here. HB 2879 would allow private insurance companies to bring their tax-subsidized talent for quashing claims, restricting benefits and profiting from workplace injury into Washington state. The word is that insurers will spend \$15 million or more to get it on our ballot and passed, with a big assist from their anti-government ideologue friends at the Building Industry Association of Washington.

So Washington will soon have to ask itself, shall we invite the insurance companies to come and do to injured workers what they've done to our nation's health care system?

A hearing of interest next week...

There are many more hearings on important issues than this. Visit www.leg.wa.gov for times and agendas.

MONDAY, Jan. 18—1:30 p.m. in Senate HR 3, Economic development holds a work session on the aerospace industry and extending more of their tax breaks.