

OTHER OPINIONS

In Louisiana, doing less with less

“Real leadership” is what Gov. Bobby Jindal said was needed in response to the latest episode in Louisiana’s ongoing fiscal crisis, in which the state discovered it was \$107 million short last year.

He then admonished his department heads to find ways to “do more with less.” The Department of Health and Hospitals followed through with its plan for “doing more with less.” DHH proposed cutting \$20.8 million from this year’s budget to cover its share of the state’s shortfall. The department also projected a \$50 million shortfall of its own due to a 4.4 percent increase in Medicaid enrollments. More people found themselves out of work and losing their employer-provided health coverage and couldn’t afford to pay for their own.

Going beyond the numbers, what was the actual impact of DHH’s plan for “doing more with less”? DHH would close eight parish Medicaid offices, reducing by 61 people the number of DHH employees serving Medicaid clients. And it would reduce the number of prescription drugs allowed Medicaid patients. Medicaid currently pays for up to five prescription medications. DHH’s

proposal, if approved, would reduce that to four. Thus, Louisianians in need of medical services would have to drive farther, wait longer and figure out which drugs they could do without.

This sounds suspiciously like “doing less with less.”

And how is higher education executing the governor’s “do more with less” command? Louisiana’s colleges and universities have eliminated degree programs, increased class sizes, postponed needed maintenance, cancelled programs such as language majors at LSU and UNO, and left vacant two floors at Pennington Biomedical Research Center’s newest laboratory building.

LSU has cut over 375 positions, including more than 140 faculty members. And the cuts keep coming – the university just announced it is eliminating 14 more faculty members in the foreign language department. Southern University, meanwhile, recently announced 36 additional layoffs on top of the 27 who had already lost their jobs.

These two examples are just the tips of the icebergs. As James



EDWARD ASHWORTH

Point of View

Carville and Henson Moore recently noted in this paper, “We cannot cut our way to excellence.” There comes a point when we have to realize that trying to address revenue shortfalls by budget cuts alone means failing to make important investments in Louisiana’s future.

There is a better way. Louisiana’s problem isn’t

that it has been spending too much money. It’s that the combination of a national recession and ill-advised state tax cuts have brought about a collapse in revenues. Simultaneously, needs are rising. To make this right requires a balanced approach that includes revenues instead of relying on cuts alone.

The alternative is untenable. Medicaid provider rates were reduced in the current year’s budget and are targeted for further reductions in DHH’s proposed budget modifications. Continuing to balance Medicaid’s budget on the backs of providers will, inevitably, lead to fewer providers willing to serve Medicaid patients. Making Medicaid services harder to obtain and forcing patients to decide which prescription

drugs to take will lead to a less healthy population. This, in turn, will make Louisiana even less attractive to the out-of-state employers needed to grow our economy.

The constant drumbeat of negative news about our higher education funding problems diminishes faculty and student morale. Quality professors are in demand and are mobile. They vote with their feet, and some are voting to leave Louisiana. Out-of-state faculty and student prospects also read the newspapers. They will not apply if they see better opportunities elsewhere.

As Warren Buffett has cautioned, “It take 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it.” LSU Chancellor Martin agrees when he warns that the damage being inflicted today on LSU will take decades to recover from.

Under Gov. Jindal’s “real leadership” strategy, Louisiana is not doing more with less. We’re doing less with less, and we are the poorer for it.

.....

Edward Ashworth is director of Louisiana Budget Project in Baton Rouge. He can be reached at edwardashworth@lano.org.