

Services Proportional to Taxes. (FHHSB STATEMENT for release June 1, 2007)

The Florida Health and Human Services Board, (FHHSB), founded in 2001, is a statewide voluntary non-profit organization comprised of Floridians, from Key West to Jacksonville, who are concerned that the people in local communities of Florida should be well informed about the problems they face in the domains of health and human services.

For the past six years, our major focus has been on child protection and child welfare, being critical of Florida's privatization of foster care, especially critical of their labeling it "community based care" without giving local communities any say in the contracts. Another important concern of FHHSB is health care, including mental health services, for children and others who are in need.

Aside from maladaptive organization, a constant problem of Florida's health and human services has been and continues to be the failure of the governor and the legislature to adequately fund them – even during periods of relative affluence. Now that revenue has dropped significantly, the state legislature has shown an awful lack of compassion – even to the point of failing to take advantage of federal financing available through Medicaid.

We are moved to alarm by a major new factor in the political environment. A combination of runaway inflation of property values and two years of severe tropical storms and flooding have resulted in large tax bills and huge insurance premiums for homeowners. Property owners have complained so mightily that the past two legislative sessions have been dominated by these concerns. In fact, in April of 2007 a special session was called to respond to the insurance rate problem.

The major factor is not just those "facts," but rather the response to them. Governor Bush came into office in 1998 on the slogan of trimming government and cutting taxes. Swept into office with him were representatives and senators carrying the same banner. For a decade, all candidates proclaimed they would cut taxes. And they have cut taxes. They reduced and virtually eliminated the state tax on "intangibles," – on stocks, bonds, savings accounts – and reduced state taxes on corporate income. They were able to keep the state government solvent despite those tax cuts by pushing many costs downward to be borne by counties and municipalities. As part of this, or in addition to it, the Florida Legislature and Governor Bush elaborated the system of unfunded mandates, decreeing that communities must do something but not allocating resources to do it.

The new fiscal year begins July 1, and not only have the Governor and Legislature barely settled their own budget for the state, but the Legislature is now bound and determined to force the counties to reduce their revenues (read property taxes) – by some twenty to forty percent. The Florida House and the Florida Senate, unable to agree on the size of the cuts they wanted to make in the local property tax rates, decided to convene a special session of the legislature for June 12 in order to complete the job, "for the sole and exclusive purpose of considering legislation to reduce and/or to restructure *ad valorem* taxes."

Of concern to FHHSB is that few are asking whether such cuts really have to be made. Nobody in the legislature or governor's office or, for that matter, and few in the media, are asking about the effects such cuts have on health and human services in local communities. "Cut taxes" got them elected and cut taxes they shall do, administering cuts even to levels of government that they know nothing about.

Thus, with only weeks to go before a new budget is imposed, county administrators all over the state are forced to ask their departments to prepare budgets assuming draconian cuts.

At the level where these local services are being delivered, it simply would not work to cut twenty percent (taking the most optimistic cut) from each program, including overhead costs and costs of administration. Reaching the level of cutting the legislature talks about might require giving up whole programs. Where can such cuts be taken? What would be the consequences?

How difficult these decisions will be can be seen by one example. While we are concerned about sixty-seven counties, as an example, let us look at one department in one county that I know something about because I am on its advisory board. The Department of Children's Services of Hillsborough County in the Tampa Bay area is one department within a broader division of Human Services. It provides a range of crucial services, including clinical services for children at risk of abuse and neglect, emergency shelter for such children, child and family counseling, child care licensing, parent education, severely emotionally disturbed treatment, and more.

Suppose local authorities try to reduce just one of the programs in that department, say Child Care Licensing. Hillsborough County spends a certain amount on licensing child care facilities and homes, on inspecting those facilities and homes, on screening the staff and operators, on disseminating helpful and necessary information professional development to those providers of care to Hillsborough's children, on giving advisory referrals to parents of children with special needs, on investigations of child care concerns and complaints, and on information to parents of children who need services. If the county were to cut 20 % from each activity, they would certainly destroy the effectiveness of the whole agency or office. Each activity would have 20% fewer staff. There would be fewer inspections and horrible morale. There would be at least 20% less helpful information to child care providers. There would be more complaints but fewer professional experts with less training to deal with them. This would be an awful outcome for the people of Hillsborough County, especially for the families with children. Moreover, we would still have to cut 20% from each other DCS program with similar disastrous results in each.

Now, suppose we argue that, to save money, Hillsborough County just gets out of the Child Care "business" entirely. Child care licensing, inspection of facilities, and screening of providers is the responsibility of the State of Florida anyway, and Hillsborough County has only been doing it these last thirty years because the local people, moved by community child advocates, decided that the state was not doing it very well.

So, let's say that Hillsborough County saves some money by giving up the licensing of child care. Let the State of Florida do it. The county could try to save some of the other programs, like

clinical services, child and family counseling, parent education, severely emotionally disturbed treatment, etc.

That option would also be a disaster. The amount saved from that one program would not make up for all the losses the Legislature is forcing on the whole department. Furthermore, the state as it is now governed would simply not do a passable job on licensing, inspections and screening of staff of child care facilities. Remember, the legislature has already cut the state allocations, and is now intent on cutting those of local institutions as well!

A legislative mandate of reductions in local revenue forces on counties and municipalities severe shortages that they should not have to face. Citizens' complaints about high property tax rates, high homeowners' insurance rates, high fuel prices, high medical bills, and so on, should be addressed, but not without carefully considering the contexts. Instead of studying these issues in all their ramifications at all levels, Florida politicians are relying on a slogan that gets them elected in the short term but will destroy Florida in the long term.

We who care about the long term – a term represented by the children of each community in Florida -- need to publicize how important are the things that local governments do, the health and human programs that prevent or mitigate serious problems such as poverty, unemployment, crime, and substance abuse.

We need to publicize the consequences of not doing them well, or worse, not doing them at all. If the people of these counties had known of these consequences, they would not have elected legislators who thought cutting taxes was the most important thing they could do. They would have elected legislators who would seek constructive alternatives.

Alvin W. Wolfe
Chair, Florida Health and Human Services Board, Inc.
17920 Burnside Drive
Lutz, Florida 33548 Email: fhhsb@tampabay.rr.com
Web site: <http://www.fhhsb.org>