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What Do You Do When The Cash Dries Up?

Susan Campbell, February 21, 2007

Because most of them are optimistic types, people who staff nonprofit organizations can be a predictable bunch.

Take the governor's \$35.8 billion two-year budget. A nonprofit employee, even seasoned ones who are decades into their careers, listen to budgets the same way every time: First they enjoy a brief moment of excitement - maybe this year will be different! - and then they feel that heavy and predictable letdown. Nope. Not this year, either.

With few exceptions, you don't take a job in the world of nonprofits to get rich. You take a job at a nonprofit because you believe in a mission, be it clothing the poor, feeding the hungry or providing assistance to the housebound. The zeitgeist is that the world can change, and you can help. And sometimes governors can come through for your clientele.

But not this time. Earlier this month, Ron Cretaro, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Nonprofits, called Gov. M. Jodi Rell's proposed budget a "stunning setback" for nonprofits. All told, roughly 20,000 people work in the state's nonprofits, and many do so with the thinnest of resources. The work of aiding sexual-assault victims and survivors, providing food for the hungry and helping people affected by the criminal justice system struggles along, subsisting on fundraisers and the good graces of long-time donors.

I go to some of these fundraisers. You start to see the same people, and after a while, you have to wonder where the money will come for future endeavors, or even projects that are going on now. Some of these party types have deep pockets, but every pocket has a bottom.

Disappointment in the proposed budget goes deep. Foodshare Inc., which doesn't receive state or federal money for day-to-day operating expenses, will nevertheless feel the ripple effect when the programs they serve aren't adequately funded. A skimpy state budget means those social-service organizations will rely on Foodshare that much more, said Gloria McAdam, Foodshare president and CEO. Ask her how much wiggle room she has. Already Foodshare is distributing 12 tons of food daily to nearly 400 local food programs. And yet they can always distribute more.

Eventually, something has to give. At a press conference examining Rell's budget, some service providers warned that they would have to close shop, or at least reduce their number of clients, some of the state's most vulnerable citizens. The prospect of turning them out or ignoring them can't possibly appeal to anyone.

Maureen Price-Boreland, executive director of Community Partners in Action, says things are most challenging for people on the front lines, those who work at a level at which "maybe in some instances the question of upward mobility is

a little more challenging." It's not uncommon for staff members to move to state jobs that offer better pay and benefits. In these cases, nonprofits serve as a valuable training ground, but when nonprofit employees jump ship, that leaves work unfinished and organizations scrambling to find and train new employees to start the cycle all over again.

Nonprofits already do as much as they can to make their sometimes-stressful work environment easier. Nancy Kushins, executive director of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services (CONNSACS), says her office offers employees the option of working from home. An office dog named Chomsky comes to visit a few times a week. Kushins encourages employees with babies to bring them in, too, anything to ease tension in their serious work.

While politicians argue dollars, the mission thing keeps these organizations going. Employees know that on most days, they make an impact. Maybe they change laws. Definitely they change lives, but if these already overloaded organizations don't see some operating cash, and soon, that's going to change. And then what?

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