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Budget Cuts: Will Children Pay?

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Aug 6, 2010



Juvenile Court Judge Timothy Pape has a disturbing prediction for Georgia. He expects to see many – and possibly more – of the state’s children getting into trouble or falling victim to abuse, but less being done about it.

His daunting forecast is, in large part, inspired by recent reports that yet another massive state budget shortfall is forcing state agencies to slash already stretched budgets even further for the 2011 financial year.

According to the Georgia Budget & Policy Institute at Georgia State University, as the state begins its 2011 fiscal year it is facing a potential budget shortfall of between \$413 million and \$613 million. This shortfall is in addition to the \$2.5 billion in budget cuts already implemented since the 2009 financial year.

“These budget cuts essentially are helping to take away the big stick which we use to enforce treatment and rehabilitation,” insists Pape, of Floyd County, who contends that he’s been disturbed by the state legislature’s decision to steadily decrease the detention time that judges can sentence juveniles from 90, 60 and then to 30 days. Decisions, he asserts, that are financially driven.

“The state cuts services and saves money, but the unintended consequences are that you send a message to young people that if you do something [bad] nothing’s going to happen to you,” he says. “The state saving money is going to come at a high cost to our children.”

The institute’s executive director Alan Essig agrees.

“Georgia has never been a state that has provided significant funding for juveniles, so we’re already coming from a low base here,” he says. “This is going to have a significant impact on the most vulnerable populations in Georgia.”

Governor Sonny Perdue, acknowledging the likely possibility that Congress will not pass the \$375 million enhanced Medicaid match extension for Georgia, recently ordered the state agencies to amend their budget proposals by Sept. 1. The mandate requires each to include plans for four, six and eight percent budget cuts. The judicial branch, public defender, human services and juvenile justice – all agencies that provide direct services and support to young people in the state – are on the list. The Department of Education has been instructed to plan for a two percent budget cut.

“Our 2010 budget was built largely around the assumption that Congress would extend the Medicaid funding formula,” says Governor Perdue’s Director of Communications Bert Brantley. “Thirty to 31 other states did the same thing. At this point, the prospect is iffy at best and the governor felt we could not wait to make this decision.”

The budget gap, the institute reports, is due to several factors; including the lost revenue from the Medicaid match and the fact that the state transferred \$37.7 million in Education Stabilization Recovery

Act funds budgeted for 2011 into the 2010 budget. The state also has a projected shortfall in the State Health Benefit Plan of as much as \$200 million.

Georgia is facing a fiscal year 2012 structural deficit of between \$1.8 billion and \$2.0 billion. Preliminary 2010 revenue reports from the Office of Treasury and Fiscal Services show a \$121 million revenue shortfall in 2010. If accurate, the institute reports, it would result in an additional \$121 million shortfall in fiscal year 2011. The final 2010 audited revenue figures were not available at the time of the report's publication, which means the 2011 deficit could be higher or lower.

"These agencies are going to have to come up with a plan to meet their goals," explains Essig. "They just got their marching orders two weeks ago so right now many of them really do not have a final plan."

Judge Pape predicts that in the areas of juvenile justice and social services, the budget cuts will result in Georgia children receiving less treatment. He also fears fewer resources will be available overall for those who need to be removed from dangerous homes. Shorter sentences for children who require detention are also a concern.

"What's happened is that the state legislature has continuously changed the amount of time that judges can place kids in the YDC (Youth Detention Centers) and only in limited circumstances," he says. "They say it's about reducing the number of kids in the system, but it's really about saving money. That means the state does not have to pay for as many detention beds."

Brantley says naturally Governor Perdue is aware that the cuts will have some impact, but he also has fiscal responsibilities.

"Will this have an impact on those who receive services from these agencies," he says. "Definitely. But we also have a balance budget requirement that we cannot avoid. We cannot spend any more than we take in."

After the September 1 deadline the budget proposals will be submitted for analysis and Governor Perdue will ultimately hand off the budget proposals to the next governor who takes office January 1.

Pape suggests that the governor and lawmakers avoid across the board cuts to the judicial system and consider reducing mandatory minimum sentences that contribute to expensive and possibly avoidable prison overcrowding.

"Everybody wants to be tough on crime (with the mandatory sentences) because they think that's politically correct," Pape says. "But it only results in a lot of people being locked up for a long time. If [the legislators] work on restoring judicial discretion, we could look at each case on a case-by-case basis. That would make a major difference in reducing costs and not at the expense of our children."

For more information about the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, visit www.gbpi.org.

Chandra R. Thomas is an award-winning multimedia journalist who has worked for Atlanta Magazine and Fox 5 Atlanta. She has also served as a Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow at Atlanta's Carter Center and as a Kiplinger Public Affairs Journalism Fellow at The Ohio State University.



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2 Responses to Budget Cuts: Will Children Pay?

Philip Spivey

August 5, 2010 | 12:32 pm

What Judge Pape is saying here is well known to all of the juvenile court judges statewide. While some of the cuts in bed space have been compensated for by more probation resources in the Ocmulgee Circuit, the constant erosion of judicial authority has resulted in: 1) less direct judicial oversight of delinquents; and 2) ineffective consequences/treatment for continued antisocial behavior which tends to worsen as the juvenile approaches adulthood. The federal justice department has required more services in institutions and I fear that the state's response has been largely to "declare victory and go home" by reducing short term treatment to 30 days. This is indeed a fiscally-driven strategy.

Ellen Miller

August 6, 2010 | 2:39 pm

Judge Spivey,

Thanks so much for your comments. We are following the budget situation and hope to get more details from DJJ soon.
