

Gov. Deval Patrick's budget prioritizes education, human services

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[Gov. Deval Patrick is calling for increased support for education](#), human services and health care in his fiscal year 2015 budget.

But critics are concerned that the lack of new state tax revenue puts a chokehold on the budget's ability to make significant new investments, and most funding levels are still less than the pre-recession numbers.

"This budget is a balanced, responsible budget that supports our growth strategy of investing in education, innovation, and infrastructure to create jobs and opportunity in the near term and strengthen our Commonwealth in the long term," Patrick said in a statement. "I am proud of the progress we have made by working together and governing for the long term over the past seven years. Let's continue this work, inspired by our shared commitment to leave to others a better Commonwealth than we found. In that spirit, I look forward to working with the Legislature on this budget."

Patrick's budget proposes \$204.9 million in increased education funding. Highlights include a \$100 million increase in funding for kindergarten through high school, a \$15 million increase to provide more early education programs and \$68 million more for funding higher education.

According to Patrick, his budget proposal will increase employment opportunities and help people find jobs in the state's growing industries. It earmarks \$141 million more for transportation related work and \$25 million to support growth in the life sciences sector.

In the area of health care, Patrick's budget proposal offers the most impact in the area of human services that support state residents and continues the efforts the state has made to expand access to health care for individuals and working families.

Family advocates have applauded Patrick's proposed \$32.6 million increase for the state's troubled Department of Children and Families. Though only a 5 percent increase, it is estimated that the money will help reduce caseloads per social worker and allow the DCF to hire as many as 150 new social workers and staff. Critics still point out that, even with the increase, DCF's funding is still less than what was earmarked in 2009.

Michael Weekes, president and CEO of the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers, which is the state's largest human service trade association, said that the most significant budget

item for human services is an over \$150 million increase in funding for the Community Residential Services for the Developmentally Disabled. This increase would increase the annual budget from \$847 million to over \$1 billion.

“There is no doubt that the biggest highlight is the additional investment the government made in the individuals with developmental disabilities,” Weekes said. “That is the largest additional investment to that community in nearly 30 years.”

According to Weekes, other positive highlights in the budget include: \$25 million in funding for salary rate reviews for human services workers and \$15 million to implement “Raise the Age” legislation signed by Patrick in 2013 that changes juvenile jurisdiction laws to support the rehabilitation of young people through the age of 18.

A big concern for Weekes in Patrick’s budget proposal is the minimal increase in funding for the Department of Mental Health, which he said does not even keep up with the cost of running the program.

“I am concerned we are not seeing the money there we need for child and adolescent services and adult services in the Department of Mental Health — if those proposals go through there will be less money to fund services, there will be some clients that will lose services,” Weekes said.

According to Weekes, about 200 children and families, as well as 250 adults, could lose services as a result of Patrick’s proposal.

“That is not a good thing because for many children and families this is the safety net. If they can’t get services from here it is unlikely to get it any place else,” Weekes said. “They have no place else to go and that is what we should all be concerned about, eliminating services to people in the community that are the most vulnerable.”

He is also very discouraged by a 3.6 percent cut in funding for the Employment Services Program, which helps support employment services for people with disabilities. He points out that people with disabilities have the highest rate of unemployment and the state’s efforts are making a difference in this area, but will flounder without the necessary funding.

Overall, Patrick’s budget proposal increases state spending 4.9 percent from 2014 to \$36.4 billion, which he says is in line with the projected tax revenue growth of 4.9 percent.

Noah Berger, president of the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, said that the biggest challenge faced in the state’s budget is that without a substantial increase in new tax revenue there is not enough money to make investments that can have a long-term impact.

Berger said the state is still struggling with the impact of tax cuts that reduced the tax rate on wage and salary from 5.95 percent to 5.3 percent, cut the tax rate applied to dividend and interest income

from 12 percent to 5.3 percent and doubled the value of the personal tax exemption. The combined effect of these three cuts is a loss of \$3 billion in annual revenue to the state.

“The long-term challenge for the Commonwealth is that living with the effects of the tax cuts and not having the revenue needed to make investments in our people and the economy is not going to be easy,” Berger said.

According to numbers from the Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center, the state faces a gap of approximately \$514 million between ongoing revenue and the cost of maintaining current services and commitments.

Patrick’s budget overcomes this gap by using one-time revenue from sources including reserve accounts, the sale of gambling licenses and federal funds. However, his budget also proposes tax increases on items such as candy and soda that have been shot down by the House and the Senate in prior years.