

NH Public Radio – May 1, 2017

N.H. Senate Budget Writers to Hear From the Public on State Spending Priorities

By Paige Sutherland

After hearing from state agencies for several weeks, Senate budget writers will now hear from the public on how New Hampshire's next two-year budget should look. On Tuesday, the Senate Finance Committee is scheduled to hold a public hearing on the state budget from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. but lawmakers expect it to go even later.

This will be the committee's only public hearing and dozens of people are expected to attend and voice their concerns. Areas expected to get the most attention are funding for social services such as mental health, developmental disabilities and substance abuse. The Senate has until June to draft its version of the budget.

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Paying for mental health

The Senate Finance Committee will hold public hearings this week on the state's two-year budget. The process is a bit different this year because the House failed to pass the budget bill, HB 1, and its companion legislation, HB 2. But the Senate is using two other legislative vehicles to haul the budget through the obstacle course.

We doubt that many of the lobbyists, political activists, and ordinary citizens testifying on the budget this week will be begging senators to cut spending. We hope senators keep the silent majority of taxpayers in mind as they weigh the merits of each new dollar of state spending. Sens. David Watters and Jeb Bradley today make their case to increase state aid for local kindergarten programs (A7.) They argue that full-day kindergarten benefits young students, so the state should help fund it. The claim that businesses are avoiding New Hampshire because some towns offer half-day kindergarten begs credulity.

Not every good thing must be provided by government, and not every program has to be funded by the state. Lawmakers and Gov. Chris Sununu want to spend an additional \$20 million on mental health programs, over and above the governor's budget proposal. This is a more pressing need than subsidizing kindergarten programs that local districts have already adopted. If budget writers want to add money for mental health, they need to get it from somewhere.

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Change Direction NH: One year in

John Broderick and Peters Evers

MAY IS MENTAL HEALTH awareness month. It is also the one year anniversary of the launch of Change Direction NH, a statewide effort to shine a bright light of hope, understanding and better communication among families, friends and co-workers about mental illness and the early signs of trouble. For too long, mental health has existed under a dark shadow of stigma. For too many, signs of problems were either ignored or unaddressed because of a fear of speaking up. Mental illness is a health problem. It deserves the same care, empathy and respect that we provide to all physical health problems.

According to national reports, more than 61 million Americans will experience some type of mental health disorder in a given year; that's more than one in five people. One-half of all mental illness arises before age 14; two thirds by age 24. Among those people, just 25 percent have stated they felt "understood" or "supported" in their illness. Stigma is a damaging interloper that can prevent progress. Last year, suicide deaths outnumbered traffic fatalities. While that is a frustrating reality, there is reason for hope. The same national reports suggest that upward of 90 percent of people who received treatment for their mental illness showed and felt improvement. It is clear treatment works.

That simple reality is the foundation of the Five Signs campaign. If we spot signs of emotional distress early, and then talk to people about their challenges, then we can better connect our family, friends, loved ones and coworkers to the treatment options that will combat mental illness. The Five Signs:

Personality Change Agitation Hopelessness Withdrawal Poor Self-care

Change Direction NH, with the help of providers, hospitals, businesses and a generous group of benefactors, launched a public effort to make sure Granite Staters heard about and learned the Five Signs. Our goal was to make these warning signs as recognizable as signs of a heart attack or stroke.

Our efforts led to printing more than a quarter of a million palm cards that have been distributed to more than 100 various schools, businesses and associations.

We're proud to know those cards are posted on refrigerators and informational boards all over our state. We have traveled more than 13,000 miles in the last year around New Hampshire; connecting with rotaries, chambers of commerce, educators and students, doctors, parents and community organizations in an effort to spread the word about Change Direction and encourage people to fight the stigma, step out of the shadows and speak out.

As we hit the ground, we also worked with generous donors of all backgrounds to launch a TV, online and radio air campaign, to encourage everyone to learn about the Five Signs and ask for help. We could not have done it without many media partners and hospitals and providers who granted us their funds, their time and their energy to keep this campaign visible. So what's next? While our efforts to inform the people of New Hampshire about the five most common signs of mental illness will continue, we will soon be focusing much attention on the mental health challenges that exist in our workplaces. In fact, some estimate that American businesses lose up to \$300 billion a year from unexplained absenteeism and loss of productivity due to unseen, undisclosed and often undiagnosed mental illness. Working alongside business leaders, we will explore ways to assist business leaders in providing more help to their employees.

Working with HR professionals, we will create and expand a template of aid, so that emotional and mental health issues are treated just as physical challenges are handled. Our friends at the Business and Industry Association of New Hampshire are hosting a summit meeting later this month with other business leaders to talk about how to construct such a template. Finally, many thanks to our friends at the Union Leader for generously partnering with us for the entire year to spread messages of hope, help and awareness in these pages – you have made a difference in the lives of others and for that, we deeply appreciate your assistance. Onward.

John Broderick and Peters Evers are co-chairmen of Change Direction NH.