

TRANSFORMING WASHINGTON'S BUDGET IDEAS

Responses from Marty Brown, Director, Office of Financial Management

Require drug tests for state payments

Our state and others have considered this idea and determined that mandatory drug testing of all recipients of public assistance is probably unconstitutional. Blanket drug screening without a reasonable suspicion that the individual is using illegal drugs would likely be found to be a violation of the constitutional right to be free from unreasonable searches. Additionally, the cost of urinalysis for all recipients would be substantial, and there would be legal costs to defend the results against any claims that the screening test is not accurate.

In 2008, the Washington Legislature considered a bill to require recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to submit to periodic urinalysis if their reliance on public assistance was related to substance abuse or chemical dependency. The bill died in a legislative committee.

Currently, our state's two public assistance programs assess recipients for chemical dependency and may require them to seek treatment.

Tax the casinos

Tribal gaming is governed by the federal Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. States cannot override this federal law.

Under this law, tribes have a right to offer gaming if the home state of the tribe offers gaming in any form. Tribal casinos are operated by the tribe and profits benefit tribal government programs. Private ownership of tribal casinos is prohibited by law. If a tribe wishes to open a gaming casino, it must negotiate a compact with the state.

The federal government monitors and approves any state tribal gaming compact. In some states, compacts have been negotiated to allow for "revenue sharing." The federal government closely scrutinizes any compact that provides for revenue sharing to ensure a tribe receives something of equal benefit in return. In most states, no other entities are allowed to offer gaming in exchange for revenue sharing. In our state, non-tribal card rooms do offer gaming.

Unless federal law is changed, Washington state cannot tax tribal casinos, nor compel the casinos to share revenue without offering something of value in return.

Reform the welfare system

The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program — formerly called food stamps — is a federally funded program that provides cash assistance to low-income individuals and families to supplement their household income for food, and is the largest anti-hunger program in the state. Individuals and families receive benefits on an electronic benefits transfer card, similar to a debit card, connected to a bank account. We are monitoring purchases by these recipients for non-food items, which must be separately purchased. It is more difficult to monitor purchases made with a recipient's own money. We recently have moved to ensure that debit cards cannot be used at casinos.

Require English only

Federal law requires that certain public assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, provide information to clients in their native language. Washington State cannot override this requirement and still receive funds for this program.

The Department of Social and Health Services has researched the accuracy of translation software. Unfortunately, the software produces translations that are only partially accurate. DSHS has adopted a policy not to use this type of translation service until the quality improves. By producing inaccurate translations, the department does not meet federal regulations regarding equal access and discrimination.

Stop government waste

This is a great suggestion that has already been implemented. The Governor's Ball is paid for by private donations, a foundation and ticket sales. There is no tax money used for this once-every-four-years function. If you know of any other "parties" subsidized by taxpayers, please let us know.

Spend it or lose it doesn't make sense anymore

The Governor couldn't agree more with this idea. That is why we have created an incentive plan for agencies where they get half of the money they don't spend to then use on training and essential equipment. The remainder goes back into the General Fund. We also look much more carefully at previous spending when we develop the next budget to make sure we are getting the best possible value for each taxpayer dollar.

Don't pay for special sessions of the Legislature

Decisions on whether to pay members for their service made by the Legislature, not the Governor, so you should contact your legislators with your views on this topic.

Require welfare recipients to work

This is already happening. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program provides job training, education and cash assistance for low-income parents to help them gain employment. One of the training programs is Community Service and Community Works. This and other programs provide employment skills through a job setting that directly benefits the community. More than 12,000 parents have been enrolled in the "Welfare to Work" program.

Stop serving meals with meetings

This is a great idea and part of current state regulations. It is contrary to state policy to provide meals with meetings, but we are being much more vigilant in enforcing it and refusing to reimburse agencies when they do provide meals.

Close the D.C. office

Most states have offices in Washington, D.C., to help with federal issues and to track and advocate for matters important to their citizens. Issues such as jobs, economic recovery, transportation, health care and immigration reform cut across state boundaries, and having a voice in our nation's capital ensures that ours is heard. We sublease a small, one-person office from another state. The Governor believes this arrangement is cost effective and beneficial for the people of Washington.

Crack down on fraud

The Governor agrees with this idea and that's why the Department of Social and Health Services now has in place extensive fraud and prevention programs to ensure that taxpayer funds are used to serve our most vulnerable citizens. Our public assistance programs have a zero tolerance policy and sanctions for those who abuse the system. This is in recognition that any fraud reduces vital resources needed by those who are struggling and erodes confidence in the state to spend those limited resources wisely.

To boost recovery efforts, DSHS has closely aligned fraud and recovery services and further continues to find ways to reduce fraud. It has a toll-free number for individuals to report fraud and abuse of public assistance: 1-800-562-6906.

Limit salaries

The Governor and the Legislature have not granted general wage increases for almost four years. The only exception has been for a fraction of employees who receive "step increases," which are given to newer employees who start at lower wages and are advanced as they gain experience. During collective bargaining this year, the Governor held the line on salaries by not offering any increases.

A recent salary and benefits survey conducted by an outside firm revealed that contrary to public perception, most employees working for the state make less, on average, than do employees in similar jobs in the private sector and other government jurisdictions. A summary and the report are available at the Department of Personnel's website at <http://www.dop.wa.gov/compclass/compensation/pages/totalcompensationsurvey.aspx>.

A chart comparing state salaries with pay rates in both private sector and other public sector employers is available at <http://www.dop.wa.gov/SiteCollectionDocuments/CompensationAndJobClasses/Salary%20Surveys/2010TCSResults/2010SalarySurveyResultsAtAGlance.pdf>

The most recent Personnel Detail Report for the state shows that 97 public employees are paid more than \$250,000 a year. Eighty-two of those employees are at the University of Washington, 11 at Washington State University, two at Western Washington University and one each at Central Washington University and the Washington State Investment Board. There are a little more than 109,000 total public employees, including about 48,000 working in higher education.

Require proof of legal residency

This is an idea we regularly review. The Washington Legislature has addressed the question of whether legal residency should be a requirement for public services. Some laws establish programs that are available only to citizens or legal immigrants. Other programs, such as those providing medical assistance to children or prenatal care for women, may not require proof of citizenship or legal immigration status.

Additionally, federal law contains certain requirements that affect state programs, such as requiring citizenship documentation or proof of legal residency in the United States to obtain Medicaid coverage.

Proposals to require proof of legal residency need to be evaluated in the context of a specific program or service, and will most likely be discussed again in the Legislature.

Cut the state's travel budget

This is another good idea that we have used. Last year, the Governor ordered a freeze on non-essential travel. This year it was extended by the Legislature. All out-of-state travel must be approved by the Director of the Office of Financial Management, as is true for out-of-office meetings.

Have inmates help care for parks, beaches and highways

This is another great idea and we do it now. Hundreds of inmates successfully work for the Department of Natural Resources to plant trees and fight fires, among other things. We have other community crews for minimum security inmates. Only minimum security inmates are appropriate for this work, and that is who we have doing it.

All inmates are required to participate in work assignments, education (such as working toward a GED), chemical dependency treatment or vocational training, if necessary, as security or medical conditions allow. Offender wages from correctional industry programs are used to pay for the cost of incarceration, victims compensation, court-ordered fines, restitution, family and child support, and to establish an offender's savings account.

State law prohibits offender work programs from competing with private businesses. Most correctional industry programs create products that can be purchased by government and nonprofit groups. The importance of offender re-entry work programs is clear and the state continues to look for new opportunities.

Prevent lawmaker salary increases

The Governor agrees that there should be no pay increases during these tough times. Legislators, statewide elected officials and judges all have their salaries set by a citizen commission, as provided in the state Constitution. There are public hearings across the state where people can voice their views on this issue. Input on this suggestion has been forwarded to the salary commission so its members are aware of citizen concerns.

Have polluters pay for clean up, not taxpayers

This is a great idea and a fundamental principle in Washington's environmental protection laws is that polluters pay for cleanup. For example, a railroad company is now conducting a community-wide cleanup in the town of Skykomish. The cleanup addresses historic contamination from previous owners, and includes restoration of natural resources and replacement of contaminated septic systems. The Governor and the Legislature continue to look at additional ways to keep polluters accountable.

Cut small business taxes

There has been legislation in the past to reduce or eliminate the business and occupation, or B&O tax, for new and/or small businesses. We now have a B&O tax credit for very small businesses. More than 90 percent of businesses have fewer than 500 employees, and more than half have fewer than 50 employees.

We recognize that our small businesses are very important to job growth. We also realize that it is hard for many businesses to expand now due to uncertainty in the economy. That's why in recent years the Legislature has required job creation or retention to qualify for tax exemptions.

Allow retirement buyouts

This is a really great idea that the Legislature has authorized as a management tool to reduce costs and make more effective use of resources while improving employee productivity and morale. Agencies may use voluntary retirement and separation incentives that are cost neutral or result in cost savings over a two-year period.

Options include financial incentives for voluntary separation or retirement, voluntary leave-without-pay, voluntary workweek or work hour reduction, voluntary downward movement or temporary separation for development purposes. Many agencies and their employees are taking advantage of this idea.