

## Advocates make their cases before Senate Appropriations Committee

Posted By [Alicia Freese](#) On April 1, 2013 @ 10:31 pm In [Politics, State Budget, Taxes](#) | [2 Comments](#)

Now that certain warning cries and requests for the 2014 budget have gone unheeded in the House, advocates are turning their attention to the Senate. On Monday afternoon, the Senate Appropriations Committee listened to advocates detail their needs in advance of taking up the budget bill passed by the House last week. The testimony lasted three hours — each advocate was allotted five minutes to make their case, and every slot was filled, leaving some on a waiting list.

The requests for funding spanned many sectors, from HIV/AIDS prevention to land conservation. Some sought simply to dissuade the committee from removing items already in the budget passed by the House; others were hoping to revive proposals that didn't make it into the House bill.

Not everyone was there to solicit funding. Many advocates spent their allotted time to warn against the proposed caps to Reach Up, the state's family welfare program.

Advocates described the Reach Up cap — proposed by the Shumlin administration and included in revised form in the House's budget — as a rash policy plan that will end up costing the state more money.

Representatives from housing organizations asked the senators to consider the "ripple effect" that a cap on Reach Up would have on their programs.

Richard Williams, the executive director of the Vermont State Housing Authority, cautioned the committee that cutting off Reach Up benefits will force his organization to pick up the slack when families can no longer pay their portion of the rent. That, in turn, will leave less funding for others, potentially impacting more than 200 additional families.

Joe Patrissi, executive director of the Northeast Kingdom Community Action Agency, said groups like his were kept in the dark about the proposal, which has left them "playing defense." The cap, Patrissi added, will simply shift costs to the state's general assistance, public housing and protective services programs.

Karen Lafayette, a lobbyist for the Vermont Low Income Advocacy Council, offered a lyrical rebuttal to an oft-repeated utterance among Shumlin administration officials — "The 't' in TANF [the federal acronym for the family welfare program] is for temporary, not timeless."

"You can't get to prosperity through austerity," Lafayette told the committee, urging them to consider the cumulative impact the proposed budget would have on low-income Vermonters.

Another recurrent concern is rising out-of-pocket health care costs low-income Vermonters will face when they enter the [health care exchange](#) [2]. The House budget includes subsidies for low-income Vermonters but they fall short of what some Vermonters received through the VHAP and Catamount state health programs. Advocates like Peter Sterling, the executive director of the Vermont Campaign for Health Care Security, called on the committee to do more to make health care affordable for people falling in the \$20,000 to \$30,000 income bracket.

The impact of the federal sequestration also loomed large throughout the hearing — many advocates were asking for funds to compensate for the void it is expected to create.

Vermont Cares, an organization that provides HIV/AIDS services, "will take quite a hit" when the sequester kicks in, according to executive director Peter Jacobsen. That will compound the impact a 50 percent reduction of federal funding for prevention, which took place this year, Jacobsen said. Federal pressures are prompting Vermont Cares to request an additional \$100,000 after being level-funded for the past 14 years. The budget passed by the House allocates \$219,246.



[1]

Sen. Jane Kitchel, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee. File photo by Josh Larkin

Representatives from the Vermont branches of the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association asked the committee to leverage an additional dollar on the cigarette sales tax.

Disability rights advocates drew attention to a \$2.5 million reduction in the budget for the Developmental Services division of the Department of Aging and Independent Living. Karen Schwartz, the executive director of the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council, said this will likely spur DAIL "to cut the individual budgets of people currently receiving services," which, Schwartz added, has already happened four times during the past five years.

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## 2 Comments To "Advocates make their cases before Senate Appropriations Committee"

**#1 Comment** By [Ann Raynolds](#) On April 2, 2013 @ 7:10 am

"These people are trading a lower premium for significantly higher out-of-pocket costs," Sterling said. "The administration is lowering someone's premium by about \$60 a month and raising their out-of-pocket costs by about 2.5 times (from \$1,050 to \$2,500). That to me is not a great deal."

Peter Sterling's comments which I copied from an earlier version of this article ... are not in this version. Peter's comments tell the real truth about these Exchanges. Touting the cost of premiums for low-income Vermonters in the Exchanges is deceptive advertising. There will be higher deductibles and co-pays according to the latest FULL explanation of rates in the Exchanges. What is at stake for the Senate is whether or not they will betray the hundreds of Vermonters now on VHAP & Catamount who would see their out-of-pocket expenses for actual health care service increase by as much as triple current costs to them. Unless subsidies are raised for these Vermonters we may see a new pool of uninsured citizens. They will return to free clinics and the hospital emergency rooms. I am putting my faith in our Senators to see through this smoke & mirrors on premium costs to the inflated costs of actual health services for low income Vermonters and hope they do the right thing by increasing subsidies for these plans.

**#2 Comment** By [Bill Bissmich](#) On April 2, 2013 @ 4:35 pm

I rather doubt their was an 'advocate' for the many tens of thousands in my situation: hard-working, tax-paying, honest, law-abiding, never any burden to society. The majority of politicians stopped being 'our' advocate years ago and seek only to slowly bleed us dry to support their pet causes.

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[2] health care exchange: <http://vtdigger.org/2013/04/01/state-releases-proposed-premium-rates-for-health-insurance-exchange/>

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