

United Way of Rhode Island Convenes Session to Discuss State's Budget Crisis

As part of an ongoing series of Public Policy roundtable discussions, United Way of Rhode Island hosted a meeting with House Finance Committee Chair Steven Costantino to discuss the state's current fiscal crisis.

The purpose of the session was to engage the organization's leadership and volunteers to discuss significant proposed changes in state department budgets which will impact our state's disadvantaged population and the services that support them.

The meeting, held at UWRI's Waterman Street headquarters, was facilitated by United Way's Public Policy Committee Chair Sean Coffey and hosted by Board Chair John Warren, and United Way President Tony Maione. Interested members of the Board of Directors and Public Policy Committee representing the banking industry, human services field, labor and other fields of interest filled the conference center with United Way senior Staff to hear from the Chairman about the issues the General Assembly will have to address in order to balance the state budget.

Chairman Costantino said the state must address its structural deficit caused by years of quick one-time fixes to bridge the funding gaps in previous annual budgets. He identified numerous areas of expenditures and revenue to be reviewed in order to save money and prioritize systems that are most important to the community. For this session, he particularly noted his plan to consolidate the state's five human services departments into one and to align services to better meet the needs of the community.



House Finance Chairman Steven Costantino (D) discusses state budget issues with UWRI Public Policy Roundtable attendees. At right is UWRI President Tony Maione

The Chairman proposed, "Creation of a single, consolidated Office of Health and Human Services, replacing and eliminating five separate departments which together cost over \$2.7 billion annually and which are locked by their very structures into chronic operational inefficiency."

He also suggested Rhode Island reevaluate its spending in the areas of health and human services.

"Rhode Island is in at the top five [in terms of spending] in most human service programs. The question is: Can we afford top five? We need to figure out what we can afford and prioritize," Chairman Costantino said.

Expenditures have been growing at annual rate of six percent, while revenues have been increasing at a rate of only one percent, contributing largely to the current fiscal year deficit of \$150 million

and the projected \$450 million pending deficit.

The Chairman challenged UWRI to help the state define community needs and to engage others in the social services community in the discussions.

Chairman Costantino said he would welcome any and all suggestions as to appropriate solutions, but emphasized that some pain would necessarily be felt by all.