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N.J. budget hearing at UMDNJ brings more pleas to restore state funding

By Matt Friedman/Statehouse Bureau

In a February file photo of a previous Assembly Budget Committee hearing, crowds pack in to the Statehouse hearing room in Trenton. More than 100 people signed up to speak at today's hearing in Newark.

NEWARK -- Community activists, town officials, union officials, school administrators, college presidents and others came to the University of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark today to plead with lawmakers to restore funding to programs that would be cut under Gov. Chris Christie's proposed budget.

A total of 111 people signed up to speak at the third and final public hearing of the Assembly Budget Committee in three sessions that will last all day. "We will be here as long as it takes," said Assemblyman Gary Schaer (D-Passaic).

The host institution, which runs Newark's University Hospital, is no exception to the cuts. Facing a 15 percent cut in state aid on top of the loss of \$32 million in one-shot funds it received last year to offset charity care expenses, UMDNJ President William Owen said the \$60 million loss will mean longer waits for some health care services and cutbacks in educational resources.

"It is going to have an impact on the university that is not going to be favorable," said Owen.

Assemblyman Albert Coutinho contrasted the cutbacks with the \$637 million in revenue the state could see if it passed the "millionaires tax," which Christie has pledged to veto. Coutinho said University Hospital has an average seven-hour emergency room wait time.

"This budget obviously shares pain for most New Jersey residents, except for 16,000 or so," he said.

Fred Jacobs, a former state health commissioner who is chairman of the anti-smoking NJ Breathes coalition, said all seven of the state's centers where residents can get help to quit smoking would have to close because the budget cuts all funding for the Comprehensive Tobacco Control Program.

"If budgets are in fact an expression of policy prioritized, which I believe is true, I must believe that the governor's policy is to condemn our citizens to have less of a chance to quit smoking," Jacobs said.

The hearing erupted in partisan fireworks when committee chairman Lou Greenwald (D-Camden) upbraided Assemblyman Jay Webber (R-Morris) for asking the party affiliation James Lavender, the deputy mayor of Woolwich Township and superintendent of the Berlin and Gibbsboro School District.

"No one who appears before this committee should ever be asked what their political persuasion is," said Greenwald. Webber said Greenwald was "posturing."

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