

July 6, 2010

## Gubernatorial candidates Q&A: The safety net

This week, we ask our gubernatorial candidates for their assessment of the state's social services safety net after several rounds of budget cuts forced by the recession. The conundrum is that people need help from the government most precisely when tax revenues fall and government has less money to spend.

The candidates we're following are: Democrats Susan Bartlett, Matt Dunne, Deb Markowitz, Doug Racine and Peter Shumlin; and Republican Brian Dubie.

Send us your thoughts to [letters@burlingtonfreepress.com](mailto:letters@burlingtonfreepress.com). If you want your letter to be considered for publication, please keep it to about 250 words and include your name, town of residence and a daytime phone number.

**Question 6: After the series of budget cuts, does the state have an adequate social service safety net to meet the needs of Vermonters?**

### Peter Shumlin

State government has been operating on an unsustainable track. As a Vermonter, I understand the importance of taking care of one another's neighbor. But we must have the resources to do so. At a time when Vermont's most vulnerable have needed services more than ever, the Douglas/Dubie administration has cut them to the bone. At the same time, Vermonters have hit their tax capacity. We cannot rely on higher taxes to provide the necessary social services. It is time for state government to reorganize our priorities.

As governor, I will focus on reducing costs in the top two areas of our budget's growth -- health care and corrections. By reducing the skyrocketing costs in both of these sectors we can lower costs for Vermonters and reinvest a portion of the savings into services.

Health care costs are consuming more and more of our economy. In the next two years, the cost of health care in Vermont is estimated to increase by \$1 billion. That translates into a \$7,000 annual increase for the average Vermont family of four. These costs are crippling our economy, hampering business growth, driving up property taxes and bankrupting too many Vermonters. As governor, I will bring these costs under control by implementing a single payer health care system. Such a system will get the private insurers out of the way, reward doctors for making people better, not ordering more tests and eliminate the millions of dollars spent on chasing money around.

The second largest area of growth in the state's budget is our corrections system. We are spending \$138 million a year on locking up Vermonters. We have the sad distinction of locking up more non-violent offenders than any other state -- often locking up people for offenses like writing bad checks or for the crime of having no other place to go (on any given day, Vermont locks up 150 people for the lack of an appropriate place to live). As governor I will work with community providers to integrate these non-violent offenders back into society. Doing so will save the state \$40 million a year. These savings will be

reinvested into mental health and substance abuse, transitional housing and early childhood education to prevent future generations from such a fate.

Reorganizing our priorities will not be easy. I ask that you therefore look not only at my rhetoric but at my record. I am the only candidate who sponsored a single-payer health care bill. I worked with other Senate and House leaders to launch the Justice Reinvestment program -- an initiative that has begun the process of moving our non-violent offenders into society and reinvesting the savings into services. I have a record of getting tough things done and as governor will ensure that Vermonter's tax dollars reflect our values and are being invested as wisely and as efficiently as possible.

## **Brian Dubie**

Our budget challenges are going to continue. Next year, we anticipate a new revenue shortfall of \$122 million. That's \$122 million that we'll spend in 2011 that we won't have in 2012.

We must continue to find efficiencies and streamline operations across state government. We will have to continue to prioritize our human services needs to ensure that we preserve our social safety net. We will also have to make changes to ensure that our safety net works like a trampoline -- helping people back on their feet -- and not like a spider web that traps them in a web of public assistance.

In its May 2009 state-by-state examination of social services and benefits, The New York Times ranked Vermont as the most generous in the nation. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that Vermont ranks 5th in welfare recipients as a percent of population.

Yet, Vermont ranks in the middle of the states -- 24th place -- for per capita income. We must bring our human services spending into alignment with Vermonters' ability to pay. Vermonters have always had a generous heart, but are limited by the size of their pocketbooks. My focus as governor will be on growing our economy, putting Vermonters back to work and restoring economic freedom and security for all Vermonters. The best social program is a good job.

We have asked, and we will continue to ask, our state workers to deliver services with fewer resources. That's a reasonable expectation. Families are doing it; retirees on fixed incomes are doing it; dairy farmers and small businesses are doing it. Everyone is doing more with less, and our state employees are rising to the challenge.

The basic reality is that government programs cannot grow faster than the underlying economy. My focus as governor will be to help grow the underlying economy so we can generate the revenue required, not just for our social services programs and to provide a safety net for our seniors and the most vulnerable among us, but also for our commitment to educating the next generation, and to continuing to make investments in highways and bridges, a clean environment, and public safety on our roads, in our homes and in our villages and downtowns.

That's why my focus is on growing our economy.

As governor, my number one goal will be to make Vermont the best place to earn a good living, raise a family and build a better future -- so that you have enough to put away for retirement, enough to start a small business and send your kids to college, enough to share with a neighbor or relative who needs a helping hand, enough to leave a better state and a better world for your children and grandchildren.

## **Susan Bartlett**

I have very real concerns about the safety net for human services. A combination of reduced budgets, reduced staff and increased demand are straining the resources of our state to their limits. Knowing that revenues at the end of 2012 are projected to be at the same level as 2005 makes it very clear to me that we have to find new ways to deliver services. We cannot expect to go back to the way we have done things in the past; the money will not be there.

We know that many of our social costs are attributable to substance abuse and mental health issues. We know that many of the folks who need help do not have the ability to pay on their own and Medicaid covers them. Medicaid reimburses below cost, so our mental health system has a financial structural issue.

Our mental health (designated agencies) and substance abuse providers have to find ways to deliver their desperately needed services to many more people than are currently receiving counseling. Years ago adult education (now adult learning) served individuals at their kitchen tables and they were certain they could not find a different way to deliver services. Adult learning underwent a dramatic structural change and now serves many more people in totally different ways and is much more successful than they were previously.

As governor I would have our mental health agencies and private practices meet and work with the state to develop a comprehensive plan for how to provide high quality services to the folks who need them. This is the only way we are going to address the corrections population; a long-term plan with the private and public agencies to address the needs of mental health and substance abuse. As governor I would reduce the red tape that goes with Medicaid, I would recommend common evaluation tools and suggest the state only pay for evidence based treatment programs. .

Where it is possible we need to make use of technology; record keeping and tracking and information can be done by technology, we need to have all of our human resources used to deliver direct services to Vermonters, not doing paperwork. I would support recovery programs in the communities and demand that all state dollars spend produce accountable results.

I am certain that working together we can solve the social issues we face. We can construct a better way to deliver services and help Vermonters get back on track to living productive, successful lives. But we all have to learn to do things differently.

## **Matt Dunne**

This is an important question with a slightly scary answer. Quite frankly, nobody knows if we still have an adequate social service safety net.

The budgeting process for "Challenges for Change" was a mess. It was performed in a hurry, without clear information and without engaging those on the front lines who could best predict the true impact of these changes. What's more, our state Legislature made the unfortunate decision to turn over to Gov. Douglas the ability to slash programs "as necessary" in the event that we still face a shortfall later this year.

As I've traveled the state and met with Vermonters working in these front line organizations, they have expressed concern about their organizations' future -- not only due to the immediate impact from the budget cuts, but also because of the additional cuts that are likely to come. Having managed both public and private sector budgets, I know that this type of "drive-by budgeting" is not the way to manage change and may put critical elements of the social safety net at risk.

As governor, I will not shy away from difficult financial challenges. I will use my experiences from the business, legislative and nonprofit sectors to develop solutions in the Vermont way: by engaging our

nonprofit partners, understanding the objectives, creating clear goals and finding ways to reduce costs while not doing damage to the most vulnerable Vermonters.

During my time leading Americorps\*VISTA, we brought functions online, increased private sector partnerships, and provided opportunities for those on the front lines to identify solutions. We also created transparent goals and posted results publicly so that stakeholders could track our progress.

Bringing these types of efficiency approaches to Vermont will make a huge difference in moving the state forward. However, without tackling our most out-of-control costs, such as health care, we will continue to be faced with devastating budget choices. My plan will change the reimbursement system to reward health care outcomes and will self-insure all Vermonters under a single payer, ensuring that everyone pays and everyone is covered.

We also must focus on fixing the underlying problems by looking at our entire network as a complete system. While leading the largest public anti-poverty program in the country I learned that the social safety net gets stretched because many people are only one flat tire away from reentering poverty. We must empower people out of poverty by connecting the dots: creating jobs, expanding job training and enacting micro-financing so low-income citizens can start their own businesses.

By reducing the demand for the safety net in the first place, we can build a new economy that works for all Vermonters. Read more at: [www.mattdunne.com](http://www.mattdunne.com).

## **Deb Markowitz**

As Vermonters, we take pride in the fact that we led the nation in our innovative approaches to addressing problems of hunger, homelessness, and poverty; and for enabling people with disabilities and our senior citizens to live independently and with dignity. We led the country when we de-institutionalized care for people with mental illness, in favor of community care. We led the country by ensuring that every child had access to health care and dental care. My goal as governor will be to maintain our commitment to our social safety net. At the same time, we must make sure we are living within our means as a state. That means we must deliver needed services more efficiently and cost effectively.

I am running for governor to keep Vermont the best place to live, work and raise a family. Two weeks ago, I released my jobs and efficiency plans for Vermont, JumpStartVT. JumpStartVT is based on my belief that the answer is neither less government, nor more government, but government that is strategic and knows its strengths and limitations. The cuts of the past two contentious budget negotiations between the governor and the Legislature should make us reexamine how adequately we are providing the services Vermonters at all income levels depend upon and, as a wife and mother of three teenagers, I know how important it is to get this right. We must get Vermonters working today because creating new jobs and a stronger economy is the best way to protect the social safety net.

As governor I will use what I learned these past 12 years in executive office, working with every community in Vermont and our social service providers. I will bring a different approach to governing -- because I know that top-down decisions from Montpelier rarely work. We need to be much less political and a lot more practical in our approach.

Challenges for change is a great example of why a top-down process doesn't work. We know that community-based services are the least expensive and most effective care we can provide. Yet, during the Challenges for Change budget process this past year, the governor and Legislature cut these providers out of the conversation until the very end of the process. This means the Minnesota consultant who came up with budget cuts did so without important information about how services are actually being provided to Vermonters. We will not be successful in strengthening our social safety net and controlling

costs unless we bring all of the stakeholders to the table, including the agencies that deliver Vermont's social services and the Vermonters who are being served.

## Doug Racine

No.

The past several years have seen broad and deep cuts in our state's human services, even as the need for services grows. Although some budget cuts made good sense, as we should always be looking for efficiencies and better ways to deliver our services, many of these cuts have done serious damage to our state and to the families who depend on us. From our schools to our mental health centers to our senior centers to our agencies on aging, I'm hearing more stories of vulnerable Vermonters slipping through the cracks.

The state has seen decreased revenues coming in because Vermonters have decreased incomes. As unemployment rates have gone up and families have seen reductions in state aid, many families are getting hit several times from different places. The result is that the economic gap is widening and the middle class is getting smaller.

We must rebuild our economy and our middle class, and we must do it thoughtfully and compassionately. This is a moral issue, as well as an economic issue. As Vermonters, we have a long tradition of caring for our neighbors. Also, without a thriving middle class, our economy will be vulnerable, and that hurts all Vermonters. We all win if we take care of our neighbors in need, at the same time that we take steps to strengthen our economy.

One of the loudest complaints that I hear in Vermont is about rising property taxes. Our property taxes are rising in our communities in part because the state has been shifting costs from the state to our towns. For example, more families with children can be found in our homeless shelters and at our food shelves, which means that more children are coming to school unable to focus on learning. In Burlington, Police Chief Michael Schirling has talked about the increased numbers of mental health crises because of cuts in mental health services in the Burlington area. The result is higher policing and hospital costs.

This is why I proposed that we use some of our rainy day funds in this budget year, rather than make deeper cuts in human services budgets. Some say it is fiscally conservative to force more and more cuts, but I say it is fiscally responsible to look at what our needs are and use the money that taxpayers have already paid this year to avoid higher costs in the future. Some of the cuts can end up costing us more in the long run -- for a dollar saved today, we might spend five in the future to deal with the economic and human toll the cuts will reap.

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