

Community View

Cuts will lead to Westchester's decline

By Sheila Klatzky

The year: 2020. The place: Westchester County. Crime rates have skyrocketed. Jails are filled with teenagers doing time for drug-related crimes, at massive public expense. Classroom teachers struggle to deal with more and more disruptive children. Immigrants mired in poverty are unable to move into the mainstream economy. Public parks stand closed. Elderly people, abused and afraid, have nowhere to turn for help. Homeless shelters are overcrowded with people living on taxpayers' dollars. Costs of public assistance have risen to levels undreamed of back in 2012.

Here's how the decline came about. In 2012 the county, in the guise of saving taxpayers money, implemented short-sighted budget cuts, which led to reductions in essential services with far-reaching impacts. Consider:

» A mother of small children who, with the help of training from the Women's Enterprise Development Center, had started a business and transitioned off public assistance, is suddenly hit with a raise in her share of child-care payments from 15 percent to 35 percent. That increases her child care costs to \$4,900 per year, or 13.6 percent of her family's \$36,000 annual income. The additional cost breaks the bank for her small business. She closes up shop and is forced back on public assistance at a cost of thousands of dollars to the public.

» A teenager who had been receiving after-school tutoring to help him reach his potential hangs out on the street after funds for his after-school program are cut, ends up selling drugs, is caught and incarcerated at a cost to the public of \$240,000 per year, according to a summary and analysis prepared by Westchester Children's Association. Prevention would have cost a tiny fraction of this amount.

» A 10-year-old child with behavioral problems is institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital at a cost of \$1,000 per day. It would have cost \$1,000 a year to help her parents learn to cope with her problems and keep her at home.



People listen to various speakers during a public hearing on the proposed Westchester County budget at Somers High School Nov. 3. FRANK BECERRA JR./THE JOURNAL NEWS

These costly and catastrophic outcomes could have been avoided by restoring the following items in the 2012 proposed Westchester County budget:

» Funding for entrepreneurial training programs and small business loans for women. These programs provide training and services to low-income women to start and grow new businesses. They help women transition off public assistance and achieve economic self-sufficiency.

» Funding for Eviction Prevention/Cash Assistance and for Eviction Prevention Legal Services. These programs stave off thousands of evictions. The alternative is homelessness with the county paying thousands of dollars per month per family for shelter in hotels and emergency shelters.

» Funding for pre-development support for affordable housing. Without support at the 2011 level, 50 homes will not be developed; 50 families will go without appropriate housing; greater compliance with the federal housing settlement with the Department of Housing and Urban Development will be threatened; \$12.5 million in private investment will not be leveraged and 250 jobs will not be created.

» Funding for Neighborhood Health Centers. Caring for patients in health centers is much less expensive than episodic, emergency care in a hospital. It also provides the economic benefits of preventing acute illnesses and allowing patients to continue working. Taxpayers are legally "on the hook" for caring for the uninsured, and hospital emergency rooms are the most expensive way of providing that care.

» Funding for Early Step Forward. Since the inception of the program, even the most challenging children have been able to remain in early childhood programs, thus better preparing them to function well in school and beyond. Without these services, taxpayers will pay more for special education or behavioral interventions.

» Funds to the Child Care Scholarship Program (and maintain parent share at 15 percent). Without reliable affordable child care, parents will have to leave the workforce and enroll in public assistance.

» Invest in Kids Fund. Positive out-of-school time opportunities for young people increase school success, reduce juvenile crime, and result in long term economic productivity, thus reducing soci-

etal costs.

» Funding for the Mount Vernon Civil Legal Services Office. The Mount Vernon office provides legal assistance to economically disadvantaged people in areas including housing, family law, benefits, education and consumer issues. My Sisters' Place provides specialized legal services to victims of domestic violence, and the Empire Justice Center deals with the many legal issues facing immigrants.

» Funding for the Elder Law Program, which provides a wide range of advocacy and legal representation to elderly clients in practice areas including housing, benefits, Medicaid, permanency planning and home care cases.

» Funding for legal services for Elder Abuse. Elder law attorneys provide legal representation, advice, advocacy and referrals for victims of elder abuse on matters including physical abuse and financial exploitation.

» Funding for immigrant case management services and legal services. By investing in case management the county can help stabilize newcomer families and assist them in accessing programs and services available to them. Without specialized support, newcomers cannot be effectively integrated into Westchester's communities, which will lead to homelessness and unemployment along with other societal costs.

Westchester County has long partnered with private social-service agencies to deliver cost-effective services to the county's low-income and working residents. Why dismantle programs which provide the safety-net that has improved the quality of life for tens of thousands of residents and saved taxpayers millions of dollars?

The writer, who lives in White Plains, is a member of the Communications and Community Engagement Committee, Westchester Women's Agenda, which describes itself as an organization that advocates on behalf of women and works to ensure that the social and economic climate of Westchester offers women equal access to opportunity.