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Priorities in a Time of Crisis

By

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There's never been a Golden Age of public funding for human services. These include adult day care, mental health programs, early intervention services, foster care, substance abuse counseling, training and supports for family caregivers, protection from abuse and neglect, and the like. In good economic times, other "interests" inevitably garner more attention. The "business model" sways appropriations and diverts resources. In bad economic times, services to those who are frail or have disabilities seem to bear the brunt of the cutbacks. Initiatives that would actually save the Commonwealth money through modest investment, like the Virginia Caregivers Grant Program which helps prevent costly institutionalization of people with impairments, are eliminated, sacrificed on the altar of priorities. Even in the worst of times, some things get funded. It's never truly a question of money; it's always been a question of priorities. When "across-the-board" budget cuts are applied in the name of impartiality, services that were already meagerly funded absorb a greater impact. Now, amidst economic stress, is not the time to wield the club of impartiality. Now is the time to act reflectively, not reflexively. Now is the time to defend certain sections of the budget, including the protection of those among us who are least able.

Taking this action is not political. Conservatives, moderates, and liberals, Republicans and Democrats state that they value the family and respect human life. All voice concern for the frail and "the least among us." Virginia's elders are lauded regularly for their lives of hard work and maintained values, and are courted during the election season. Fellow citizens with lifelong intellectual disabilities, cerebral palsy or mental health impairments make commanding footage on television when visiting the General Assembly. What happens in times of stressed economics proves their importance. Perhaps funding for programs and service providers that might help these groups to live safely and productively in their home communities will remain. Perhaps not. If funding for human services does continue, it is often at the cost of other human services, as agencies are asked to decide which of their many needed programs continues, and one constituency is pitted against another.

When budgets must be cut, and they must be now in these ominous times, we all --elected officials and fellow citizens-- get to ask ourselves which is more important, a road or a community-based waiver program? A capital outlay for a new building or protection from abuse, neglect or exploitation for elders and those with disabilities? A tax cut for a group of businesses or a group home for people with mental illness?

Of course, there is no simple answer to any of these questions. But that's the point. Whenever decision-making time is upon us, human services are low on the priority list. We all acquiesce to the logical arguments that business must continue to be "incentivized," roads must be built, prisons must be expanded, strong businesses make

for a strong economy, and exempting the wealthiest from tax burdens benefits the poorest. All this may or may not be true but one wonders when will it be time for the frail and those with disabilities? When will it be seen that greater investment in people who are frail or who have impairments that make them vulnerable, as well as greater investment in those who provide supportive services to them, actually enriches the whole economy?