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### STRICKLAND'S RE-ELECTION

## Friends of Ted hurt by his cuts

### Social-services officials might rethink support

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**BY JOE HALLETT, MARK NIQUETTE AND CATHERINE CANDISKY**

#### THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Deep cuts in the state budget that eviscerated programs serving Ohio's most needy citizens also could extract a price for the politician most identified with them: Gov. Ted Strickland.

Some of the Democratic governor's staunchest supporters, particularly leaders of social-service agencies, said their view of Strickland has been altered by the two-year, \$50.5 billion budget he signed into law July 17. They concede that their enthusiasm for his re-election has waned.

Jim Mauro, executive director of the Ohio chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, said the families and caregivers his organization represents are "feeling abandoned" and "astounded by the cuts" to mental-health programs that Strickland and lawmakers made while cutting \$2.4 billion to help close a \$3.2 billion hole in the budget.

"He has a battle," Mauro said, referring to Strickland's re-election campaign. "He should not presume support from anyone on the social-services side. He's going to have to earn it."

Phil Cole, executive director of the Ohio Association of Community Action Agencies, said the cuts have devastated services to children, adding, "Nobody expected a governor who truly understood poverty to slash programs to those most in need."

As for Strickland's re-election bid, Cole said, "People won't be as enthusiastic unless he can tell us how he can repair some of the fallout from the budget and let us know that there is not going to be more."

Cole's words echo across the social-services community, a force that helped propel Strickland into office in 2006, and they represent the pitfalls of having to govern in the worst of times.



**Gov. Ted Strickland will soon begin his re-election campaign.**

How the disappointment in Strickland by his friends will play out next year is an open question. Perhaps the rank and file will be less-enthused than in 2006 about going door to door, phone-banking or even turning out to vote.

But most political observers think that Strickland's allies will stay with him, if for no other reason than they view his likely Republican opponent, former U.S. Rep. John Kasich, as less-friendly to their funding desires.

According to a Quinnipiac University poll released last week, Strickland's job-approval rating improved slightly to 48 percent from 46 percent in the July poll -- including support from three-fourths of Democrats.

The poll also showed Strickland leading Kasich by 10 percentage points.

"Regardless of the recent criticisms of Gov. Strickland by social-service advocates, unions and traditional Democrat constituencies, on Election Day in 2010, those same groups will still pull the lever for the Democrat incumbent," said Michael Gonidakis, a Republican and executive director of Ohio Right to Life.

Strickland told *The Dispatch* that although he wishes he didn't have to make such cuts, he doesn't regret those decisions and can't worry about the political consequences.

The governor insisted that he made what he thought were the right choices for the state -- including not raising taxes -- during the worst economic conditions in decades.

"If someone wants to try to search my soul, look into my mind and conclude that Strickland is just a political coward and that's why he didn't do what we thought he should do and consequently we're disappointed in him, so be it," he said. "They can do that. I think they're wrong."

Strickland said he wrote letters to Democratic Gov. Richard F. Celeste when Celeste was in office with complaints about mental-health policies, but now that he's governor, he has broader responsibilities for the entire state that advocates should understand.

If they decide not to back him for a second term, "there's not much I can do about that, and that'll be a decision they'll have to make," Strickland said.

The governor plans to kick off his re-election campaign in a few weeks, and he concedes that 2010 will be a "challenging" election year. But he thinks the economy, not any fallout from the budget, will be the major reason why.

Joe Rugola, president of the Ohio AFL-CIO, the state's largest labor organization, told *The Dispatch* in July that despite the budget decisions, union members recognize Strickland as "a champion of people who are less fortunate and need a hand up."

"We fully expect our people to come home" to Strickland's side in 2010, he said.

But John C. Green, director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron, said he has heard the comments from advocates disappointed in Strickland and that it should be a concern for the governor.

Even so, Green said, it's difficult to tell how widespread the disaffection might be or what impact it

will have on Strickland's re-election bid -- especially not knowing the state of the economy at election time.

"The mood's pretty grim out there, for reasons that have nothing to do with the governor, let alone the state budget," Green said.

It's unlikely that many hard-core Democrats unhappy with Strickland's handling of the budget will vote for Kasich, he said, and Strickland's refusal to raise taxes while protecting Republican tax cuts enacted in 2005 could attract support from some independents and moderate Republicans.

Kasich said he has a record during his 18 years in Congress of being willing to work with advocates. But he also warned that Ohio needs major reforms, including in the social services.

"We can't let people who are vulnerable end up in the ditch," he said. "But I also have to tell you that we face a crisis, and we're going to have to stabilize things and there'll be nobody that is going to be a favored son."

Many of Strickland's supporters were disappointed that he didn't stave off budget cuts by calling for a temporary increase in the state sales tax or deferring the final installment of the five-year, 21 percent cut in state income-tax rates initiated when Republicans controlled the governor's office and both branches of the legislature.

"That is something the governor could have done that could have generated revenues immediately, and that was an opportunity lost," said Gayle Channing Tenenbaum, chairwoman of the Campaign to Protect Ohio's Future, a coalition of health, human-services and education organizations.

Instead, Strickland and legislators balanced the budget by authorizing slot machines at Ohio's seven horse-racing tracks, counting on gambling to generate \$933 million.

But Strickland has said repeatedly that raising taxes or making even deeper cuts necessary without slots revenue would "cripple" Ohio's recovery from the recession.

The governor insisted that despite job losses and other economic problems, Ohio is in a stronger position than other states because of the decisions his administration made.

"We have made tough choices and established the right priorities, and I think we will be vindicated over time," Strickland said.

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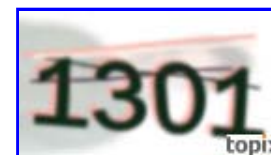
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