

Are we budgeting for an epidemic?

A critique of New Jersey's budgeting choices to address drug use and opportunities for advocacy

Overview:

The state budget process is another opportunity to advocate for drug policy reform. Many appropriations in the state budget directly fund the harmful drug prohibition/prison industrial complex and impact the social and treatment service system.

FY 2017 New Jersey State Budget Additional Appropriations:

- \$64 million appropriation for a compulsory Drug Court
- \$2 million appropriation to re-open Mid State Prison
- \$127 million additional funding for behavioral health services (rate adjustments)
- \$1.7 million appropriation to expand the Recovery Coach Program

Vetoed Funds:

- \$90,000 for Syringe Access Programs

Key Events in the New Jersey Budget Process:

Governor's State of the State Address

This constitutionally mandated address to the State Legislature, takes place on the second Tuesday of January. It is a key event where the Governor lays out major policy goals for the year.

Governor's Budget Address

Another constitutionally mandated address to the State Legislature, takes place on the third Tuesday in February. This address focuses on budgetary priorities, many of which were named in the State of the State Address.

Legislative Public Budget Hearings

The State Legislative Budget Committees hold open public hearings on the state's budget following the SOS and the Budget Address.

July 1

Constitutional deadline for the state budget to be signed into law by the Governor.

Letter to the Editor and Op-Eds

Print media is an excellent way to reach a wide audience with your advocacy message. The opinion section of the newspaper is one of the most heavily read sections. In the digital age, you can also amplify your audience by taking (or creating) the digital version of your letter/Op-Ed and sharing electronically to elected and public officials, on social media etc.

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor are short and concise. There are usually word limits of about 200 – 250 words. A good letter to the editor will be clear, timely and focus on one point.

Example: Stop Funding the War on Drugs

<http://www.dailyrecord.com/story/opinion/letters/2015/07/01/stop-funding-war-drugs/29530149/>

Op-Ed

Op-Ed pieces are typically longer (approximately 750 words) and go into more depth on issues. They should still focus on one issue. Make sure to tell people why they should care about the issue, why your voice is valid and as always be timely with current events.

Example: Thompson – State Shouldn't Fund Drug War Expansion

<http://www.app.com/story/opinion/columnists/2016/02/25/war-drugs-thompson/80940644/>

Resource for Newspapers

New Jersey Press Association

https://www.njpa.org/njpa/member_newspapers/daily_newspaper_members.html

Public Testimony

Testifying before Legislative Budget Committees is a great way to directly address these decision makers with your concerns. There are two budget committees, the Assembly Budget Committee and the Senate Budget Committee. Public Budget Committee hearings are very formal. The atmosphere is professional. If you are providing written testimony you need to have 25 copies for the committee members and their aides. It is highly recommended to have written testimony, as there are time limits on oral testimony. Written testimony allows you to leave more information with the committee if you run out of time.

Be prepared to shorten your oral remarks as committees are often overwhelmed by public input and shorten the allotted time of 5 minutes per person down to 3 minutes or 2.

New Jersey Legislature Website: <http://www.njleg.state.nj.us>

Links to previous testimony:

http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/legislativepub/budget_2017/031516/031516_sba_testimony.pdf

Key Points to Make:

1. Who are you and why is your opinion relevant? If you are part of a larger group state that up-front.
2. Be clear about the issue/problem.
3. Be very clear about the solution/action you want the committee to take.
4. Back your testimony up with references and facts if possible.
5. Be prepared if the committee asks questions but never guess if you don't know the answer!
6. Thank the committee for taking your input.
7. Follow up afterwards with phone calls or a letter.