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Proposed job cuts stun Social Services

Collins targets 218 in department; budget is already drawing complaints

By Denise Jewell Gee

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County workers in the Department of Social Services knew there would be cuts when County Executive Chris Collins released his proposed 2012 budget.

They didn't expect 218 Social Services jobs to be on the line.

"We expected a possibly devastating budget, but these are worse than anyone could have anticipated," said Kevin Kumor, an employment counselor who serves as president for the local Social Services Section of Local 815, Civil Service Employees Association.

The proposed budget cuts would trim the department's payroll by 10 percent and reduce the overall department budget from \$109.7 million to \$101.7 million.

Collins believes the cuts can be made without hurting services. Many of the jobs would come from clerical and data entry positions — areas the county executive says can be streamlined as new technologies are implemented into the work flow.

Some legislators, however, worry about cutting a department that is seeing increasing need in a lackluster economy.

"I don't care how many computers you put into the system, you still need live bodies to take care of people," said Legislature Thomas J. Mazur, who heads the Legislature's Health & Human Services Committee.

The Legislature—which received copies of the budget Friday afternoon — will spend the next two months reviewing and proposing changes to Collins' \$1.05 billion spending plan for next year.

By Monday, before most legislators had had time to review the documents, their lines were already ringing with calls of concern. Social

services workers, supporters of arts and cultural organizations and youth program participants have all reached out to lawmakers.

Collins' plan calls for cutting 308 jobs from throughout the county work force to craft a budget that keeps taxes flat as expenses in areas such as health care and pension costs rise. Because 153 of those positions already are vacant, 155 people could lose their jobs at the end of the year.

Kumor estimated that could translate into more than 100 layoffs within Social Services in January — a bigger round of cuts than he's seen in his 21 years in the department.

"I have never seen anything close to that," Kumor said. "Most social service employees, the nature of our job is a reimbursement — either through federal funds or state funds — to do our job. Most administrations realize it's not really cost-effective to eliminate positions which actually bring money to the county."

Kumor said the last time budget cuts led to actual layoffs within Social Services was during the "red-green" budget crisis under former County Executive Joel Giambra. All of those workers, he said, were hired back within two years.

"I believe there was a recognition that there was a need for what those employees were doing," Kumor said. "And without them there, the work really couldn't get done."

Collins credits bringing the management program, Lean Six Sigma, to the county in identifying ways to use technology to streamline county government. He points to examples such as voice recognition software now used by probation workers and document scanners that have been implemented in Social Services.

Collins estimates he will have trimmed 940 county jobs in his four years in office when his term ends in December.

The Legislature, which has until mid-December to finalize the budget, will now schedule hearings with department heads as legislators pick through the 429-page spending proposal.

Majority Leader Maria R. Whyte said her office got calls Monday about cuts to arts and cultural funding and youth programs.

"At this point," Whyte said, "I just want to hear everybody out and take it one piece at a time."

Some county officials have already reached out to legislators or spoken publicly to express concerns.

Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz, who is running against Collins for county executive, called proposed cuts to his office "petty politics."

Collins last year sought to eliminate 15 employees from the Comptroller's Office. .

This year, Poloncarz requested that nine of those positions be put back into the budget. Collins restored only two and cut the job of associate deputy comptroller.