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Haslam opts for 'smart government'

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It's budget time again in Tennessee, and we are facing our economic challenges by having the same tired, old argument — “big government” vs. “small government.”

But our budget discussions should never center around “big government” vs. “small government,” because what the hard-working people of Tennessee really want is “smart government” and “effective government.”

A smart government knows that by protecting the health, safety and welfare of our most vulnerable neighbors, we become not only a more effective government, but also a healthier state. Last week, Gov. Bill Haslam took a giant step toward smart and effective government by introducing a budget amendment that would reduce or eliminate many previously planned cuts to mental health services and TennCare. The amendment restores services for infants, seniors and families struggling to care for loved ones with mental illness. Although there are still areas of concern, such as infant mortality and some disability services, this is a thoughtful, positive step toward strengthening communities and maintaining our infrastructure. Now, we recognize the need to balance the state's budget, but balancing it by any cuts to the social infrastructure is not necessary, especially when viable alternatives exist. As we move forward with budget discussions, let's focus on these alternatives to cuts:

Viable alternatives

1. Use reserve funds. The “rainy day” fund exists for the purpose of preserving

crucial state functions during economic hard times. With tax revenues gradually improving (projections are \$200 million more than this fiscal year), use of the reserves during the coming year, while leaving an appropriate balance in the fund, is the responsible thing to do.

2. Special disability workload. Tennessee is owed \$80 million in overpayments made on behalf of SSI recipients that should have been paid by Medicare. These are state funds, and when matched are approximately tripled.

3. Corporate tax loopholes. Close them. 4. Premium tax. Soon after TennCare started in 1994, the legislature passed a premium tax to help support TennCare. This premium tax could be raised from 5.5 percent to 6 percent. Any combination of these will raise sufficient revenues to avert cuts to the social infrastructure — cuts to TennCare, to mental health services, to people with intellectual disabilities and to other critical social programs. Last week, Gov. Haslam demonstrated his commitment to smart and effective government, and to supporting and strengthening families and communities. His restoration of proposed cuts to health care, mental health, long-term care and disability services will allow thousands of families to receive the help they need, while demonstrating his commitment to the real priorities of the hard-working people of the state. A coalition of statewide nonprofits has been working to maintain funding for essential state infrastructure and services for vulnerable Tennesseans (visit the coalition members at www.TNpriorities.org), and we applaud the leadership that Gov. Haslam has shown on issues related to the social infrastructure of the state. With the support of compassionate lawmakers for these critical services, we have faith that the governor's proposal will be adopted as it makes its way through the General Assembly.

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