

Starving the beast

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“I don’t want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.” Grover Norquist, President, Americans for Tax Reform

The good, the bad, the ugly

The public health community in Nevada can claim a small, yet noteworthy set of victories during the recently completed session of the Nevada State Legislature.

Public health and safety measures signed into law include enhanced provisions relating to warnings about the health hazards of smoking during pregnancy, a number of important health care transparency and patient safety measures, and new prohibitions on the use of cell phones while driving.

Governor Sandoval also signed important legislation that will advance the development of a statewide health insurance exchange and the widespread adoption of electronic health records by hospitals and other health providers.

By any measure, though, programs and policies that promote and protect the public’s health took another beating by state lawmakers this year.

Defeats include last-minute legislation pushed by tavern owners and Democratic leadership allowing adults-only bars to serve food to smoking customers. In addition to thumbing their nose at the will of the people by reversing provisions of the voter-approved Nevada Clean Indoor Air Act, state lawmakers and the governor have chosen to ignore nearly two decades of established science on the health and economic costs of second hand smoke.

Legislation banning smoking on higher education campuses, requiring insurers to cover smoking cessation services, and increasing taxes on tobacco products also failed to make it to the governor’s desk.

The worst hit to public health was the passage of legislation eliminating the Trust Fund for Public Health, thereby ending the use of tobacco master settlement dollars for sorely needed public health promotion programs, disease prevention services, and public health research in Nevada funded by the trust.

During the 2011 session, lawmakers left and right continued the now standard practice of diverting already scarce dollars originally earmarked for tobacco control and other public health activities (\$60 million and counting) to the general fund to plug persistent budget holes.

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Lost in most assessments of legislative session winners and losers is the ongoing attack on public health programs in Nevada – an assault that has been part and parcel of longstanding “starve the beast” efforts by state and local anti-government conservatives.

Starving-the-beast tactics refer to deliberate efforts by conservatives to create or increase existing budget deficits via tax cuts to force eventual reductions in the size of government or “the beast.”

The strategy has been succinctly summarized by economist Paul Krugman who argues that rather than proposing unpopular spending cuts to health care, education, public health, and other social programs – spending that most Americans want more of, not less – Republicans have pushed through popular tax cuts with the ultimate aim of worsening the government’s fiscal situation. “Spending cuts could then be sold as a necessity rather than a choice, the only way to eliminate an unsustainable budget deficit.”

Efforts to shrink the size and scope of the federal government have been constrained by the willingness of both parties to rack up huge deficits and the absence of any constitutional requirement for Congress and the President to balance the federal budget.

The ability of state lawmakers and governors, including Nevada, to successfully starve the beast is another matter.

Before the 2011 legislative session began, Nevada ranked 24th among US states in per capita public expenditures for elementary and secondary education (\$1,790), 47th in per pupil public expenditures for elementary and secondary education (\$8,089), and 48th in the nation in per capita public expenditures for higher education (\$544). Fiscal “necessity” forced state lawmakers to make additional cuts to education and programs serving the next generation of Nevada workers and tax payers.

Nevada also ranked 48th among US states in per capita expenditures for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (\$8.59), 49th in per capita Medicaid expenditures (\$516), and 43rd for public expenditures for public health services such as immunizations and family planning (\$149). “Necessity” forced additional cuts to these programs serving most vulnerable among us.

I could go on.

To some degree, all of us in the voting public share some culpability with the situation we now face – we often appear unwilling to pay for the government we want. One nonetheless hopes that between now and the next legislative session we begin to rethink the definition of fiscal necessity and demand more courage from our elected officials.

As for public health in Nevada, this much I am certain: The beast has been starved.

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