



Children's clothing allowance an important back-to-school boost

By Paul Long & Sharon Parks
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As summer draws to a close, stores are filling up with back-to-school bargains that signal the start of the new school year.

This month, the state sent \$84 per child to some 143,000 children across Michigan's 83 counties to purchase clothes for the upcoming year. These are among the poorest kids in the state – those living in families who depend on the Family Independence Program (FIP) for income.

In more affluent households, that amount might be considered a pittance – not even enough for a fancy new winter coat. But for struggling families, it means shoes that fit, perhaps a warm coat and boots from a used clothing store, a backpack, underwear, socks and jeans purchased at a discount store.

It makes a world of difference to children who do not have much. It helps their self-esteem and gives them motivation for that first day of school.

But that clothing allowance is on the chopping block. The Senate-passed plan for the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1 would cut next fall's clothing allowance to \$43 per child. This is a once-a-year payment to help cash-strapped families purchase school clothes.

The Senate-approved budget also cuts \$10 per person per month in the cash assistance program that helps children in the poorest families in the state with rent, utilities and other basic needs.

That would cut the maximum grant for a family of three from \$492 a month to \$462 a month, putting a family with no other income at 72 percent below the poverty line.

Already, the cash assistance program, which stagnated without increases for years, has eroded. From 1979 to 2009, the purchasing power of the grant declined by more than 50 percent, due to inflation.

Repeated budget cuts to the safety net over the last seven years means the state is less able to help families during these tough times than it did in past recessions. Consider that between 1979 and 1996, two-thirds of kids living in poverty received cash assistance under the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children program.

Now, less than a third of children living in poverty are in families receiving FIP.

The cuts to the clothing allowance and to the monthly FIP grant would be a double whammy for the state's families who live in the deep end of poverty.

The state cannot count on nonprofits, which are already buried by demand after years of a bruising economy, to step up and fill the holes left from these kind of cuts. Nonprofits have been playing a huge role, but they report they are stretched thin.

We must set aside our political differences and come together for the common good – to make sure the most vulnerable among us have their basic needs met. The state should keep the \$84 clothing allowance as is, and avoid cutting the FIP grant.

The state budget is a statement about the character of our community. It should say, 'Michigan cares about vulnerable children.'

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