

Rell's motive for shutting out watchdogs questioned

Some suggest political payback playing a role in plan to cut agencies

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Hartford - When Gov. M. Jodi Rell this week proposed to shutter a slew of state watchdog agencies, including some whose closure wouldn't even help the state reduce its growing budget deficit, many at the Capitol posed the same question: Was this payback?

The governor, citing a two-year budget deficit that legislative analysts peg at \$8 billion to \$10 billion, proposed to sharply curtail the number of state agencies and commissions, closing or eliminating 23 such bodies that she said were duplicating the work of other offices or were simply unaffordable in bad times.

But the move would also displace a number of public officials and agencies who have occasionally clashed with or embarrassed the Rell administration, including Child Advocate Jeanne F. Milstein, who has uncovered problems at the Department of Children and Families, and Healthcare Advocate Kevin P. Lembo, who has clashed with state officials on health program reform.

"I have heard it from so many legislators that they're really just stunned that the governor would do this, and a lot of them have suggested this is just political payback and a way to silence a critic," said Ellen Andrews, a member of the advisory board that unanimously recommended Lembo for nomination to a second four-year term late last year.

"If he does his job right, then he's going to be critical," said Andrews, who works for the nonprofit Connecticut Health Policy Project, and has been allied with Lembo in his criticism of the governor's Charter Oak Health Plan and changes to state Medicaid programs. "To silence that voice is irresponsible. It's irresponsible policy-making."

In interviews and briefings since the budget was unveiled, Rell representatives

and budget advisers have vigorously disputed the suggestion that anyone was targeted for opposing the governor's policies.

"Kevin is a dedicated public servant and has done a fine job," said a Rell spokesman, Rich Harris. "This is a budget matter, and that is all."

In a briefing for reporters shortly before Rell's address on Wednesday, Robert L. Genuario, the governor's budget chief, defended the elimination of Lembo's office. "We think that consolidations and eliminations are the way to go," he said. "We think we need to reduce the overall structure of government."

Some of the agencies and commissions Rell would close are already defending their relevance to legislators.

"We have a child-welfare agency on the brink of federal receivership," said Milstein, whose position would be absorbed into the Attorney General's office and her investigative staff eliminated. "What this move does by stripping us of our authority is send us back to the Dark Ages. There is a dark curtain around the executive branch and DCF. We will go back to the days when children died in state care and no one knew why."

"If we are such relics, why is there still a wage disparity?" said Theresa Younger, the executive director of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, which would be eliminated, along with its \$1.1 million annual budget and 10 staff members. "Why do we still hear from women about sexual harassment? Why in this day and age are women still penalized? Why's there still a glass ceiling?"

And then there are the offices of the Healthcare Advocate and Consumer Counsel. The proposed closure of the agencies won't even help cut spending from the state's bottom line. The health care office's roughly \$1 million annual budget comes from the state's Insurance Fund, which is raised by a surcharge on insurance companies. The consumer counsel's office, which represents utility customers, is funded through a similar surcharge on utility bills, and staff there noted dryly this week that eliminating their agency will actually cost the state more money: The counsel presently pays rent to the state for its offices in New Britain.

"We appreciate what the governor's got to do and the decisions to balance the budget," said Mary J. Healey, the consumer counsel, "but slicing and eliminating a watchdog for ratepayers makes no fiscal sense, and from a consumer protection standpoint, it makes even less."

The consumer counsel's office, Healey noted, is the only entity with the legal standing to sue the state's public utility regulators on behalf of utility customers, and is the only one dedicated to those customers' interests.

Defenders of the agencies also wonder about how their conflicts with the

administration may have affected their fate.

The governor's fledgling Charter Oak Health Plan was in the midst of a run of bad press last August when M. Lisa Moody, Rell's chief of staff, fired off an e-mail to Lembo, the health care advocate. The Day obtained the message under the state Freedom of Information Act.

"Your job is to advocate for 'health care' - PLEASE DO IT," Moody's message began, adding that Lembo had "not been quiet" on the significance of the fact that the Charter Oak program does not meet the coverage standards of commercial insurance plans.

And, Moody warned, "you have been calling reporters to shop the issue - we know, because they have told us directly."

With Rell's surprise decision to eliminate Lembo and his office from the state budget this week, some have suspected payback.

Lembo wouldn't speculate on the governor's motives, but said butting heads with the administrative branch was part of the job.

"It's no secret that dealing with independent advocates in government is not always convenient, and sometimes it even makes the job of elected officials more difficult," he said. "It's how elected officials deal with the discomfort that is really telling."

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