

During this past summer and fall, Vermont Interfaith Action travelled throughout the state to conduct 11 presentations in 9 regions to over 450 people on what they have called a “moral economy” – a term for fiscal and economic policy that creates opportunities for all Vermonters to make ends meet and support their families. One of those presentations was held at Grace Church last fall.

Following this speaking tour, representatives from VIA met with Governor Shumlin and Secretary of Administration Justin Johnson to ask them to take a first manageable step toward the moral economy envisioned by publicly publishing a Current Services Budget.

They agreed to this request and did include their definition of a Current Services Budget on page 10 of the Governor’s budget presented to the legislature in January.

Basically this version shows what it would cost to level fund the current budget into 2017.

However VIA’s definition of a Current Services Budget, one that would be more useful, would reveal the costs of programs to which the state has committed, if they were fully funded according to statute.

For example, in statute, one of the purposes of the Reach Up program is to “Improve the well-being of children...by providing for their immediate basic needs, including food, housing and clothing.”

In practice, the state calculates the basic needs of each Reach Up-eligible family according to family size and other factors. But the benefit paid is not this basic needs amount. Instead, the benefit amount is based on the funding the state has budgeted for the program. What that means for Reach Up families is that they get just under half the amount the state has determined they need to meet their basic needs. What would be more helpful in a Current Services Budget is what it would cost to pay a benefit that fully meets these families’ needs.

These numbers are requested not so that lawmakers or the administration will be denounced for making tough budget decisions, but so that ordinary people and experts from advocacy organizations can help you make these tough decisions. Maybe our aspirations for some of these programs will need to be scaled back, or cut out altogether, or alternative ways to provide them found, or more money raised to pay for them. There are a variety of solutions that could be pursued – but unless the actual numbers are known, we don't even know what the discussion should be about.

In the next few days, Vermont Interfaith Action will submit language to the Appropriations Committee to require the Administration to produce a Current Services Budget that reveals the cost of fully funding programs, and to complete this task by October 1 of each year. We thank you for your consideration of this request.

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