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Budget Cuts That Go Too Deep

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You knew there would be problems, right?

On Wednesday, Gov. M. [Jodi Rell](#) presented her two-year budget for the state. For the most part, she protected local public schools, but certain demographic groups — people with AIDS, for instance — will take it in the teeth if her budget is approved, as will some respected watchdog agencies whose charge is to ensure fairness for people too often left out of the loop.

That's what happens when a budget appears to obsessively comb through such issues as the abuse of state cars while it sails by real people who are hurting.

Let's call those people "the vulnerable," that group the governor suggested we take care of in her State of the State address last month.

This month, we balance our figures — sort of — on the backs of such people as nonviolent juvenile offenders, whom the governor suggests do fine in adult prisons despite a law passed last year to correct the mess. We decimate AIDS services by \$3 million — that's money that helps provide health care, housing, medications, food — and shrug our shoulders and sigh that cuts are painful, yes, but necessary.

But these aren't cuts. They are the equivalent of sawing off limbs, and the potential injuries go deeper.

Callers to United Way's crisis/information/referral phone line no longer ask so much for information about how to find a good substance-abuse recovery program. Now they ask where they can get free food, or where they should go if they lose their apartment.

We are in a health-care crisis, a housing crisis and a crisis of faith, and Connecticut's safety net is already tattered. Homeless shelters are packed — and worse. The people at Immaculate Conception Shelter and Housing Corp. talk about closing their summer respite program. For most of its 27-year history, the shelter shut its door for the summer, but five years ago, the shelter — responding to complaints from neighbors who were tired of the clientele hanging around despite the facility being closed — gathered its limited resources to keep the doors open all summer for their toughest cases, including the HIV-positive, the elderly and the mentally ill.

This year they need \$100,000 to keep the barest of bare-bones summer program going, and that does not include meals. Otherwise, these vulnerable (that word!) homeless men are out on the street, maybe knocking on the door of yet another full shelter. Or maybe they'll just hang around the neighborhood. That's the thing about vulnerable populations — if you don't address their problems now, those problems only grow.

Sharon L. Eastman, associate director at Immaculate Conception, says her clients are tough cases. Most shelters accept people only if they aren't drinking or using drugs. Immaculate takes clients as they are because, says Eastman, "you can't help people if they die from the cold and the elements. These men are human. They are used to pushing people away. You let them in and you talk to them. You treat them like they are human."

This is a horrible time to try to decide who most deserves our attention and our tax dollars. It requires Solomon-like wisdom and not a little prayer. So go to it, General Assembly. Trim the fat. Consider regionalization. And represent all the people. Remember the governor's earlier charge to care for the vulnerable. She said it herself: We are Connecticut. This is what we do.