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## Budget outlook may worsen, lawmakers warn

BY JONATHAN TAMARI • GANNETT STATE BUREAU • APRIL 2, 2008

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**TRENTON** — Advocates for the disabled, for hospitals, for the mentally ill and for the blind all spoke passionately about their services Tuesday, urging lawmakers not to cut their state support in the face of New Jersey's financial problems.

Lawmakers had dire news: The picture could get worse, not better.

After hospitals led off the last of six budget hearings open to groups who rely on state funding, Assemblyman Louis D. Greenwald, D-Camden, told speakers they should have a Plan B ready, in case economic troubles lead to less money available to go around, not more.

"We need to be prepared that the revenues for the state of New Jersey could go down," said Greenwald, chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee. "We're going to have to face realities if we have less revenues."

The nonpartisan Office of Legislative Services has already predicted that the budget year that begins July 1 will yield \$289 million less in tax collections than what Gov. Jon S. Corzine first expected for his spending plan.

Making up that gap could require even further cutting than Corzine has already proposed. He has called for reducing the overall state budget by \$500 million, to \$33 billion, but that move, he has said, requires nearly \$2 billion in spending constraints in order to offset fixed costs that would otherwise have meant a larger budget.

One person who did get a warm reception was Rocco Fiorentino, an 11-year-old Voorhees resident who is blind and came to speak out against a \$611,000 proposed cut to a program that provides services to the blind, such as teaching kids to read Braille, job training, in-home nursing and assistance to families.

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"Gov. Corzine said the budget is designed to protect the most vulnerable in our society, but the cuts will not protect me," Rocco said.

He urged lawmakers to avert any cuts to services that help the blind learn to read Braille.

"To all blind children, Braille is our only way of reading and writing," Rocco said. "Without Braille, I could not function in school, I could not read books, and most importantly of all, I may not ever be able to get a job."

Budget documents show that the Department of Human Services expects to reduce the number of workers who serve the blind by 54, to 255.

Rocco made a similar appeal in 2005, and his comments to lawmakers became a symbol for lawmakers as they scoured state government to find wasteful spending that could be redirected.

Greenwald, who also lives in Voorhees, introduced Rocco as a personal friend.

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