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## N.J. Gov Christie turns 'tough guy' on budget woes

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TRENTON, New Jersey (Reuters) - New Jersey Governor Chris Christie has a better shot at fixing the state's severe budget problems than some of his predecessors because of his forceful style and a public recognition that something radical is needed to fix chronic and deepening deficits, experts say.

In office less than a month, the Republican shocked Democrats on February 11 by declaring a "fiscal state of emergency," issuing an executive order allowing him to freeze spending and slashing \$2.2 billion from the budget.

In the coming 2010-11 fiscal year, Christie warned that New Jersey faces an \$11 billion deficit -- the largest per-capita of any U.S. state -- and deeper cuts are likely to follow when the new budget is published in March.

States throughout America are struggling as rising unemployment costs more in benefits and cuts into tax revenues. The Garden State's woes are heightened by its limited ability to hike taxes, with its property taxes already the highest per capita in America and unemployment at 10.1 percent, the highest in the state in 33 years.

Against that backdrop, any success Christie has in fixing New Jersey's financial problems may offer a model for governors facing similar problems across America.

Aides to Christie's Democratic predecessor, Jon Corzine, say he rebalanced the budget several times to leave the state with a surplus of \$496 million by the time he left office in January. But Christie rejects that, saying after adjusting for Corzine's overly optimistic revenue projections, he inherited a \$1.3 billion deficit.

Christie, a former U.S. attorney, has angered the state legislature's majority Democrats by signing a raft of executive orders they say circumvents elected representatives. But analysts say the budget hole is so deep that swift, decisive action is needed.

"He's a real New Jersey tough guy," said Maurice Carroll, director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, and a veteran observer of New Jersey politics. "New Jersey has attitude and he has attitude."

'NEVER WASTE A GOOD CRISIS'

Christie is the first New Jersey governor to try to resolve a budget crisis by executive order, Carroll said, and has a decent chance of succeeding because he was elected to fix the state's finances.

David Thornburgh, executive director of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania, said Christie may also benefit from a Republican resurgence in the historically Democratic state.

"He is following the page in the playbook that says you should never waste a good crisis," said Thornburgh.

As a result, he said, voters are likely to accept the need to reduce or eliminate a range of programs designed to support the sick, the poor and the disabled.

But dozens of people urged a state Assembly Budget Committee hearing on Wednesday to rethink planned cuts.

Rocco Fiorentino, a blind 13-year-old, urged the panel to resist the cuts he said would take away the braille reader with which he was reading his speech.

Fiorentino said that without the \$6,000 machine he would be unable to attend public school and would have to go to a special school for the blind, at a higher cost to the state.

"I will no longer be able to keep up with my sighted peers," he said.

Jon Bramnick, a Republican Assemblyman, defended the speed of Christie's actions and his use of executive orders.

"We have no choice," Bramnick said. "There isn't a lot of room for discussion. Harsh action is necessary."

(Editing by [Michelle Nichols](#) and [Mark Egan](#))