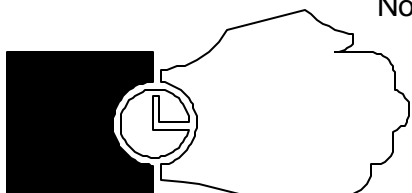


## *Learning the Budget Process*

# Timing is Everything in Politics



No one has time to waste. In order to be an effective advocate, it is important to know the legislative cycle and how and when to impact the process. The budget is the most important bill to move through the Legislature each year. Understanding the budget process can enable advocates to act with the "biggest bang for the buck." The Massachusetts budget runs on a fiscal year cycle that begins July 1 and ends June 31. The following time

line is useful for advocates planning their legislative calendars.

### ***September - December***

#### **Where is the budget?**

The Administration, under the Governor, begins the budget creation process. Each agency and department submits a budget to its executive office. For example, the Department of Mental Retardation, Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission and Massachusetts Commission for the Blind identify their priorities and submit their budgets for the next fiscal year to the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS). Then all the Executive Offices, e.g., Health and Human Services, Consumer Affairs, Elder Affairs, submit their budgets to the Executive Office of Administration and Finance, which prepares the Administration's (Governor's) version of the total state budget. Sometime during this period the Administration holds open budget hearings, and takes public testimonies.

#### **What your agency should be doing**

Meet with the commissioners of your respective agencies to request that your priority issues become the priorities of the respective Commissioners and the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Prepare position papers and provide resources to support your issues. Begin to meet with those legislators who have been consistently supportive of your issues to share with them the priority issues of your agency. Also, attend budget hearings, and if possible arrange to testify.

#### **What you should be doing**

This is a good time for families to send letters to the Commissioners, the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Governor's office. Describe the needs of your family. For example, if you need after school care to keep your family member home, tell them this. If you need a ramp, a tutor, or a full residential program, explain that too. Personal letters are a very effective weapon in the advocacy arsenal.

In the Legislature -- Families and local ARCs take on the critical role of laying the grassroots constituency groundwork with Senators and Representatives. Get to know your legislators! Meet with them, call them, write them. Tell them what your needs are, that you are going to need their help when the budget comes before the Legislature. Also, visit those legislators you don't know very well. It is always important to cultivate new legislative supporters. It is only human nature that legislators are most responsive to people they know. If possible, get to know them before you ask for millions of budget dollars.

## ***January - March***

### **Where is the budget?**

According to the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Governor must present a proposed budget for the next fiscal year to the legislature by the third Wednesday of January. Copies of the Governor's budget are available to the public in the State House (Document Room 428). The Governor's budget is called "House 1" which may be confusing because it is not the budget produced by the House of Representatives.

The Governor's proposed budget goes first to the House Ways and Means Committee for review and consideration. The Legislature does not have to agree with the amounts in any of the line items in House 1, and in fact, the House and Senate will likely propose their own versions, often using House 1 as a baseline. But it is always helpful if your priority issue is already in the Governor's budget. The House Ways and Means Committee will schedule public hearings and take testimonies from groups and individuals prior to releasing a budget document to the full House.

### **What your agency should be doing**

Move into full campaign mode. Attend public budget hearings and if possible, arrange to testify. Contact legislators; initially concentrate on House Ways and Means members, but by mid-February move on to the full House of Representatives. It is helpful to do an analysis of the budget comparing last year's line items to this year's as well as identify trends, initiatives and priorities of the administration. Most advocacy groups then concentrate on increasing the amounts in each line item according to the identified budget priorities. But you can also work to strike language that is deemed harmful to your population. If possible, organize weekly visits to the State House to advocate for your priorities. It is important to provide fact sheets and other supporting documents to legislators and their staff.

### **What you should be doing**

This is a critical time to contact your legislators. Call them, write letters, and meet with them in their district offices or at the State House. Again, tell them about your family and what your needs are. Most legislators have little or no knowledge of your particular issue. If the only constituents they hear from are those families who want to keep their family members in a large institution, this is how they will vote. **THEY MUST HEAR FROM YOU.**

## ***April - June***

### **Where is the budget?**

In spring, the House Ways and Means Committee releases its version of the proposed state budget to the full House of Representatives for deliberation and debate. During this time, the House can, and often does, amend the House budget. After the budget is passed by the House, it is sent to the Senate Ways and Means Committee. The Senate has the right to put together its own budget; it does not have to agree with either the House or the Administration versions. The Senate Ways and Means Committee will hold public hearings and take testimonies before preparing its version of the budget and releasing it to the full Senate. As in the House, the Senate amend, strike, or add sections prior to passing the budget.

Generally, the House and Senate pass differing versions of the budget. A six-member Conference Committee (made up of the House and Senate Ways and Means chairs and vice chairs, and a

senior minority member of each chamber) convenes to resolve differences and draft a compromise budget proposal. The Committee releases the compromise budget for a full vote. The House and Senate vote; upon enactment the budget is sent to the Governor for his signature.

### **What your agency should be doing**

Work directly with legislators and their staff to influence policy. Provide fact sheets and other supporting documents. Meet with as many legislators and staff as possible to advocate for your priorities. Continue to organize weekly visits and urge as many people as possible to join you. Attend budget hearings and, if possible, arrange to testify.

### **What you should do**

Call, write and visit your own senators and make your case. It is very important that you contact your own legislators. Elected officials pay greater attention to communications from their own district constituents.

## ***July - August***

### **Where is the budget?**

After the Governor receives the enacted budget, he has ten working days to sign it into law. (This period often extends into early August.) He can veto line items and /or strike language and dollar amounts. The Legislature can override the Governor's vetoes. However, the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate must agree to take up each veto for an override vote. Overrides require a two-thirds vote of both the House and Senate.

### **What your agency should do**

If you want the Governor to veto certain items, write to the Governor requesting those line items or language you want vetoed. Alert organization members if there are issues or language that is harmful to the persons you represent and ask them to call the Governor's office and urge vetoes of those items. If you want the House and Senate to override a veto, call and meet with individual legislators, as well as with the offices of the House Speaker and Senate President.

### **What you should do**

If you receive an alert that there is language in the budget that would be harmful, make individual constituent calls to the Governor's office. These calls can impact the likelihood that the Governor will veto an item. If you want the House and Senate to override a veto, make individual calls to legislators, as well as to the offices of the House Speaker and Senate President.

**Remember, legislative advocacy works. Good luck with your efforts!**