

THE RECORD Editorial: Christie's opioid treatment funding plan robs 'Peter'

October 5, 2017

<https://njersy.co/2ghrL69>

We have consistently praised Gov. Chris Christie's leadership on combating substance abuse. From his early embrace of drug courts over incarceration to his often poignant face-to-face conversations with voters in New Jersey and across the nation about how drug addiction destroyed the life of a close friend, Christie has advocated for treatment, compassion and second chances. But as insidious as the opioid crisis is, the state cannot pull money from other needed programs to fund a new Christie initiative. The governor announced two weeks ago that he intended to launch a \$200 million "holistic" effort to fight opioid addiction. The obvious goal of the effort is laudable. But the devil is in the details.

Christie detailed where the money was coming from Monday night during his "Ask the Governor" show on NJ 101.5-FM. As State House Bureau Writer Dustin Racioppi reported, the governor says that about \$90 million is expected to come from savings that are the result of the recent transfer of state lottery revenues to the public employee pension fund. According to Christie, that has enabled the state to refinance its debt at lower rates.

And another \$70 million will come from "lapsed" funds — money that was earmarked for other programs and not used. Democrats have raised objections over what programs are being affected by the money grab: pre-kindergarten expansion and tuition assistance grants.

As part of the budget deal between the governor and Democratic legislative leaders — a deal that ended a government shutdown in July — certain Democratic initiatives were to be funded in the new budget, including \$25 million for pre-K expansion. Christie says \$5.6 million will come from that earmark for his opioid plan, money he says has not been used.

Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto, D-Secaucus, quickly attacked Christie for not keeping his word. "This is further proof that Gov. Christie cannot be trusted," Prieto said in an emailed statement.

We're not going to go down that partisan road.

This is more proof that Christie continues to move around the various pots of money at his disposal to pay Paul by robbing Peter. It is how the Pulaski

Skyway was repaired with Port Authority of New York and New Jersey money that should have remained earmarked for a new Hudson rail tunnel, or how money from the Turnpike Authority and the state Clean Energy Fund are keeping NJ Transit afloat.

It's not a unique political shell game. Yet in New Jersey, it has become all too common. And in these final months of the Christie administration, there is little that legislators from either major political party can do about it. The governor is not concerned about how his successor will continue to fund expanded services to fight opioid addiction. Just as he is not concerned about how his successor will pay for State House renovations.

We have never questioned Christie's sincerity in fighting a substance-abuse crisis of national proportions. But the state cannot pay for everything. The non-profit group Pre-K Our Way, whose leadership includes former Gov. Tom Kean, said Christie's action will leave 500 3- and 4-year-olds without access to early education.

Pre-K is not less important than opioid programs. We do not advocate for the continued raiding of dedicated funds, but if Christie has to raid a fund, it should not be one that expands access to early education or tuition assistance grants — both providing our state's youth more opportunities. Regardless of the objective, the governor's funding mechanism for his opioid plan is bad public policy.

Sweeney wants Christie to reconsider funding sources for opioid programs

By Linh Tat

POLITICO

October 5, 2017

State Senate President Stephen Sweeney said Thursday he'll ask Gov. Chris Christie to reconsider his plan to divert money from certain programs — including funds to support preschool expansion — to pay for the governor's anti-addiction initiatives.

Sweeney, a Democrat, acknowledged the opioid epidemic is a crisis that deserves attention, but said the Republican governor should not take away money earmarked for pre-K expansion in the process.

"We're going back and we're going to talk to him," Sweeney told reporters after a Senate voting session. He said he was "very upset" Christie had decided to use funds from certain programs Democrats consider priorities. "There are school districts that were ready to expand pre-K that were denied," Sweeney said. "And they were ready to expand. So we want to get that money back. It was hard fought. It was a priority. And [the governor] said he wouldn't take any of the money out of school funding and he did." In response to a reporter's question about whether there were districts ready to expand their pre-K programs that had their applications rejected, state Department of Education spokesman David Saenz said in an email that 29 districts applied by the Aug. 21 deadline and that "26 school districts met the requirements and were approved."

Christie spokesman Brian Murray later elaborated that of the three districts that did not receive funding, one withdrew its application and the other two failed to attend a mandatory technical assistance session.

"All eligible school districts that applied for the funding and attended the mandatory TA sessions received funding," Murray said in an email. Asked if the governor would meet with Sweeney to consider the Senate president's request that the state not tap certain pots of money to fund the opioid campaign, Murray wrote: "The Governor and the Senate President speak regularly on matters of mutual interest."

Christie, who hopes to make anti-addiction programs a lasting part of his legacy, recently unveiled a plan to pay for 25 opioid-related programs — estimated to cost between \$160 million and \$240 million — by scrounging up money found through debt service savings, lapsed funds like the pre-K dollars, and projected revenues.

Star-Ledger Editorial Board: Christie and opioids: Good cause, bad money-grab

October 8, 2017

<http://bit.ly/2y7MELi>

The governor's opioid fight could have earned him rave reviews. We support aggressive anti-addiction programs, which underscore the need to devote real money to expanding drug treatment.

He's proposing some smart ideas in New Jersey, like offering medication-assisted treatment to about 200 prisoners, rehab facilities for pregnant women or new mothers, and more money for needle exchanges and sober high schools.

Are they good causes? Absolutely. But this is not the way to do it. Chris Christie's \$200 million anti-drug initiative is a last-minute, image-salvaging PR stunt by a governor who failed to meet the pressing need over the last eight years.

He should have found a means of financing this that didn't involve budget high-jinks, or robbing from other worthy causes. Christie declared in January that he would dedicate his final year to tackling the opioid crisis. So why didn't he put these programs in this year's budget?

Or propose them years ago, given the spike in fatal overdoses?

If he wanted hundreds of millions more for this, he should have let the Legislature help devise a sensible plan, and find a way to cover the costs. Instead, he's forcing a slap-dash re-accounting in his last three months of office, when the only way to do it is to cut into bone he promised not to touch, like preschool and college scholarships.

Christie claimed he wouldn't "rob Peter to pay Paul," but that's exactly what he's doing. He's not finding free money under the sofa cushions.

He's grabbing it from little kids lined up on waiting lists for pre-k. He's swiping it from tuition aid, while middle class families are struggling to afford college. He's snatching leftover Medicaid funds, when we still don't know what will happen with Obamacare and need to be ready for ferocious cuts.

And while the anti-addiction programs he's proposing require annual funding, these are all one-shot money grabs. What happens next year to these services, and the people who have come to depend on them?

Christie's leaving our budget a wreck; we've had 11 credit downgrades under his watch, and don't have enough money to cover the commitments we've already made. Now he's adding on brand new expenses, and dancing away from covering the costs.

He granted himself the authority to do this by amending budget language with veto power, and the Legislature would need a virtually impossible supermajority vote to override him.

It reminds us of how he used anti-addiction money from taxpayers to promote himself in ads - again, great cause, but why not do it right? Get a more compelling spokesman like Bruce Springsteen, who might have done it for free? Christie tarnishes his mission with this kind of chicanery.

Funding drug treatment requires tough decisions he should have proposed long ago: program cuts, increased taxes or fees. It's not magic. And by pretending that it is, he's selling the addiction fight short, to put some gloss on his middling legacy.