

Signs of N.J. Gov. Christie's emerging social agenda

Sunday, October 17, 2010

Last updated: Sunday October 17, 2010, 9:48 AM

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO

State House Bureau

STATE HOUSE BUREAU

Two weeks ago, the federal government awarded Governor Christie's administration nearly \$4.7 million for teenage pregnancy prevention programs. But one-fifth of the money comes with one unbreakable string attached.

Nearly \$1 million must be spent teaching kids to say no to premarital sex.

New Jersey had not sought abstinence funding since shortly after Democratic Gov. Jon Corzine took office in 2006, and he stopped competing for it the following year, said Michele Jaker, executive director of Planned Parenthood Affiliates of New Jersey. "We were among the first states to stop," she said.

The decision to pursue abstinence funding didn't get much attention as Christie carved himself a national reputation as a fiscal

advertisement

conservative. But it is the latest sign the governor is also beginning to pursue a socially conservative agenda, according to some advocacy groups from both the left and right, lawmakers and political scientists.

In his first year in office, Christie also drew attention from social advocates by cutting funding to historically protected programs like public schools, health programs for working poor people and legal aliens, and family planning clinics.

"We did not vote for a socially conservative governor, even though that is who we elected," said David Redlawk, a professor and pollster at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. He said Christie, who opposes abortion and gay marriage but didn't make social policy a big part of his campaign, won because of fiscal issues.

Christie's spokesman, Michael Drewniak, said state budget woes were at the root of Christie's decisions. He said the only label he would accept for Christie is that of "a Republican governor."

"Chris Christie is being a responsible steward of the public's money and bringing fiscal discipline where there had been none," Drewniak said. "If that approach to governing differentiates him from his predecessor and the majority party in Trenton, he's just doing what he promised. That doesn't require an ideological label; that's just leadership."

Drewniak added that "spending was cut across the board in programs and departments. Many people, many interests, were disappointed, but this is what the fiscal crisis we inherited required."

Tom Wilson, former state Republican Committee chairman, agreed. "To single out this line item or that line item when everything was reduced in the budget would be unfair," Wilson said. "Those aren't social choices — they are fiscal choices. I would say he's pragmatic."

But fiscal choices reflect priorities, said Brigid Harrison, Montclair State University political science professor.

"There is some overlap between fiscal and social policy," she said. "He has a decidedly conservative view on women's health and choice. He's more conservative than voters were led to believe during the campaign."

advertisement

Cuts count as social choice

Harrison and others said Christie's \$800 million cut to public schools also counts as a social choice. Drewniak strongly disputes this, saying Christie was left with no alternative after Corzine spent \$1 billion in federal stimulus funds on education last year "with no plan to replace it."

Christie's critics also protested a cut eliminating 12,000 low-income legal immigrants from FamilyCare, the popular health insurance program for working poor people. They were dropped because they had been in this country for less than five years. It saves \$30 million.

The biggest uproar came when Christie vetoed a bill that would have dedicated \$7.5 million to continue funding 58 clinics that provide birth control, family planning counseling and cancer screenings. Since then, two clinics closed in Camden County, and two more will close in Burlington County

next month, Planned Parenthood's Jaker said.

Planned Parenthood's New Brunswick office is open two days a week instead of five, Phyllis Kinsler, executive director of Central Jersey Planned Parenthood, said. "At least we still have a presence there, but we know we are not meeting the need."

Christie has said federally funded health centers around the state will be able to absorb any increase in patients. While the governor cited money as his reason, the decision was cheered by antiabortion groups wary of Planned Parenthood's involvement in the clinics.

Health policy change

Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Teaneck, said the change in state health policy "is not pretty."

"Between the cuts in funding access to birth control and applying for abstinence education, somehow we have people caught somewhere in the last century mentally," she said.

Critics of abstinence education typically cite two studies, one by the Government Accountability Office in 2006, and another by

Mathematica Policy Research in 2007 that found these programs had no effect on teenagers' sexual activity. Weinberg said she was pleased the remaining \$3.8 million New Jersey is getting in federal aid for teen pregnancy prevention could be used to convey messages about safe sex as well as abstinence.

Conservative groups praised the move. "Governor Christie is our first pro-life governor," said Marie Tasy, executive director of New Jersey Right to Life. "He is trying very hard to fix our state and restore our culture from the bad decisions and failed policies of previous administrations so that it will be a better place to raise our children and future generations."

High marks in polls

Social conservatives had eyed Christie warily as a gubernatorial candidate, questioning the sincerity of his conversion from being pro-abortion rights to antiabortion in the mid-

1990s after becoming a father.

Steve Lonegan, a former Bogota mayor and Republican candidate for governor who opposed Christie in last year's Republican gubernatorial primary, said, "The jury is out, and should be out for a while, on whether Christie is a social conservative."

Lonegan criticized Christie for not joining the lawsuit brought by other states to challenge the federal health care reform law.

The governor, meanwhile, has gotten high poll marks from the public. Deborah Howlett, president of New Jersey Policy Perspective, a liberal-leaning think tank, said he has identified "hot-button issues" and confronted them.

"It's not so much are you conservative or liberal, moderate or progressive, Christian, evangelical. They want to know are you going to get tough and make hard decisions. He is really good at that," Howlett said. "They may not realize or care at this point about his social policy."

Susan K. Livio is a reporter for The Star-Ledger. E-mail: slivio@starledger.com

advertisement