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Lacking data, union reserves judgment on budget cuts, layoffs

COLUMBUS – Leaders of Ohio’s largest state employee union said they have too many unanswered questions about the budget cuts and job elimination proposals announced yesterday by Gov. Ted Strickland and members of his administration and, therefore, would withhold comments until they know more of the details.

“Are the administration’s proposals rational? The answer is that we just don’t know yet,” said Andy Douglas, executive director of the Ohio Civil Service Employees Association. “Although we had the opportunity yesterday to be briefed on general principles, plans and targets state managers have developed to cope with the cuts, none of them were able to get us the hard numbers and reasoning we need to evaluate their plans.”

Douglas said that state officials promised the information next week and that he planned to have union officers, staff and other stakeholders review it quickly. “Until then, we won’t know how painful and appropriate these cuts are going to be. We are particularly waiting on data regarding the number of employees eligible for early retirement incentives, the number of current vacancies, average attrition rates and the use of private contractors. We also need time to consult with consumers and community officials to understand how the loss of services and jobs will affect them,” he said.

Union leaders also said they are waiting on reports that would show whether or not front line employees will be asked to share an unfair portion of job eliminations. “Previous administrations have protected and even increased management positions during budget crunches,” said Eddie Parks, president of the union. “As a result, supervisor-to-staff ratios have grown and eclipse those found in the private sector. To be fair, Gov. Strickland promised us that the job cuts would be weighted towards supervisors but we have a responsibility to confirm and monitor those plans.”

Parks expressed appreciation for efforts to get information to the union. “Gov. Strickland has made his agency directors available to us to help answer questions and exchange concerns, and this is helping to clarify where problems may occur,” said Parks.

According to Parks, the union will also be examining whether the plans contain unintended consequences. “Not handled properly, early retirement incentives, for example, could cause an unanticipated flight of skilled workers. If something like this

happens in the Department of Mental Health, state officials might suddenly find themselves without enough staff to safely operate the Dayton facility until the planned closing date,” he warned.

OCSEA also wants to see evidence that the use of private contractors will be curtailed. “Gov. Strickland and his staff promised that all private contracts would be examined and they should be. One research group, Policy Matters Ohio, noted that between 1991 and 2001, the value of personal service contracts with the state tripled. Millions of dollars are being lost to unmonitored contracts and now is the time to get serious about reining them in,” said Douglas.

OCSEA represents 36,000 employees who work in a variety of security, blue collar, regulatory, direct care, clerical, IT and professional occupations and is an affiliate of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.