

« [Gov. Kitzhaber and tax reform](#)

Gov. Kitzhaber and the protesting home-care workers

As previously announced, home-care workers represented by Service Employees International Union Local 503 handed out informational leaflets explaining their side of a dispute with Gov. John Kitzhaber over the loss of health insurance benefits in current contract talks. They were outside the Governor Hotel in Portland, where Kitzhaber delivered his state of the state address.

(Full disclosure: The yellow leaflet carries an image of a Statesman Journal story written by my colleague, Dennis Thompson Jr., and published Nov. 14.)

Kitzhaber responded to a question after his address at a Portland City Club luncheon.

I should note two things. Hours for home-care workers were cut by 5 percent on Jan. 1 as a result of the current two-year budget. In the actual contract talks, the state seeks to reduce overall compensation costs by 10 percent; one of the ways this happens is by raising the minimum hours for a home-care worker to qualify for health insurance benefits, so that fewer workers qualify. A 2000 ballot measure permitted some home-care workers to organize and bargain with the state; other groups have been added through the decade.

First, some comments from Courtney Henrich of Portland, one of the affected workers, an SEIU member. “I am working fewer hours and not getting my health care, which I had earlier,” she said. “I am now working about 80 hours (per month); before, I was getting my health care while I was taking of someone who needed full-time care. I still have 80 hours, but I am no longer getting that care.”

She also said that like many of the other workers, her hourly pay has been frozen at \$10.20 for several years. “That isn’t enough for me to get health care,” she said. “So I am out health care, and my wages are lowered as well. So that is affecting my food, my living situation — pretty much across the board. I am also looking for more work.”

Second, Kitzhaber, who mentions them in the context of his health-care transformation:

“I believe that home health workers and community health workers will be the backbone of the new delivery model that keeps people with chronic illnesses in their homes and not in the hospital. The reality is that we have a very difficult budget and we have chronic unemployment of 9 percent. We’ve got \$310 million less now than we did when we put together the budget. We’re going to have to make some difficult choices. I met yesterday (Thursday) with the legislative leadership — the (budget) co-chairs, the House co-speakers and the Senate president — to begin a process to figure out how we can do this. There will be some cuts in this next (2012) session.

“I am not going to defend the budget or all of the results. We are doing the best we can to set priorities. But I also think we need to keep our eye on the long haul, and make sure the choices we make in this biennium will reduce the impacts we are going to have on 2013-15 (budget). We continue to seek (federal) waivers to allow us to use the dollars we have more efficiently, and to try to get those hundreds of millions of dollars in federal resources into this state, hopefully in this biennium, to mitigate some of those cuts. But I cannot tell you that some of those cuts are not going to take place.”

Although Ed Hershey, the spokesman for SEIU Local 503, was awaiting a turn at the Portland City Club microphone, the session ended before he could ask a question. (Because the program was live on Oregon Public Broadcasting Radio, it had to be cut off at one hour.)

— Peter Wong

About

Statesman
[View all](#)

Recent

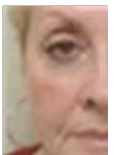
[Gov. Kitzhaber works](#)

[Gov. Kitzhaber](#)

[Gov. Kitzhaber continues](#)

[Official re-bonded](#)

[Gov. Kitzhaber](#)



This entry was written by [Peter Wong](#), posted on [January 14, 2012 at 3:54 pm](#), filed under [Capitol Watch](#) and tagged [Gov. John Kitzhaber](#),