Recently, Governor Lamont, recycling a Connecticut news item from earlier last year, generated a fresh national headline when he went live on Good Morning America to announce the state would leverage $6.5 million of the state’s federal COVID relief money to pay off medical debt owed by residents. The state will use the money to partner with a nonprofit organization the governor’s administration says will cancel debt a fraction of the cost.

The end of that news report ended with fawning praise, with one of the morning show anchors, former Democrat party advisor George Stephanopoulos, telling his co-hosts, “This is going to help so many people, I hope other states follow that lead.”

The reality in Connecticut, however, is more complex. The governor’s policy on medical debt is part of a larger story: The spending choices made by his administration and the legislature.

Should using this money to pay off what’s most likely uncollectable debt for hospitals be a priority right now, particularly when there are so many other needs statewide?

The chapters of our tale are being written right now, as some state lawmakers, local leaders, and a variety of advocates and organizations take aim at the state budget they say fails to deliver the money residents need. Many legislative Democrats have suggested the state’s strict financial controls—commonly called “the fiscal guardrails”—are, well, too strict. They’d like to open the funding spigot by loosening the rules. Day by day, the total requests grow.

To his credit, Governor Lamont, isn’t planning for a radical expansion of spending, and like Republicans, he is holding firm on the guardrails. After all, these controls have helped the state to rebuild its Rainy Day Fund while also allowing us to pay down some long-term debt.

In my view, the problem isn’t the controls. It’s how we—or more specifically my majority party colleagues—choose to spend the money.

For example, undocumented immigrants are eligible to secure Medicaid coverage until 15, and if they apply by then they can keep it until 19. That policy decision in Connecticut is projected to exceed the budgeted amount by a startling $30 million. Despite that, some lawmakers want to expand the age of eligibility even as our nation grapples with illegal border crossings.

With priorities like that, it’s no wonder there’s a struggle to properly fund core government functions such as heating assistance for seniors and other vulnerable populations.

For me, the decision to pay off uncollectable medical bills falls into a similar category. I have little doubt that people with medical debt who don’t qualify will be left disappointed, while advocates and local leaders who say they need more money for things such as local special education will be understandably frustrated.

As the adage goes, Connecticut—one of the highest taxed states in the nation—doesn’t have a revenue problem, it has a spending (priorities) problem.

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