

Arizona's Budget Needs Leadership, Not Fantasy
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The Goldwater Institute delivered the proverbial lump of coal to Arizona children and families this holiday season. It comes in the form of a so-called "policy brief" that is remarkably short on reality and short on analysis about how to close Arizona's budget deficit for the current year.

The Goldwater Institute treats the deficit purely as a math problem: the goal is to get the numbers to balance. Nowhere in the brief is there mention of consequences, impact, or goals. Nowhere is there discussion about making our state stronger, healthier, or better educated.

But Arizona voters expect more than basic arithmetic from the state legislators we just elected. We are counting on leadership with vision and goals – and with an understanding of what Arizona families are struggling with across this state.

Although they call their policy brief "a fresh start," Goldwater's main theme for balancing the budget seems to be going back in time. Over and over again they talk about shrinking budgets back to where they were two or three years ago or more.

We are confident that our lawmakers will not be so shallow. Certainly, our world has changed in the last three years. Three years ago, the only Democrat anyone thought could be in the West Wing was the fictional President Jed Bartlett. Three years ago, Arizona had 114,000 fewer children and 6,000 fewer prisoners. Three years ago home building in Arizona set a record pace. And three years ago, Arizonans flew on America West Airlines.

Yes, our world has changed a lot. And we elected our new legislative leaders to govern for today and for tomorrow – not for yesterday.

In many cases, the Goldwater Institute comes up with arbitrary dollar amounts to cut from specific budgets. They casually point to "other funding sources" or "private organizations" as being available to fill in the gaps from their recommended budget cuts.

But our lawmakers cannot afford to be so casual. They know that the cupboards are becoming bare in food banks, and cities, churches and "other funding sources" are tightening their fiscal belts. They know they cannot say with a straight face that others will be there to fill in the gaps their budget cuts will leave behind. And their constituents know it too.

The Goldwater Institute is willing to shut the door on hungry children, homeless families, women with breast and cervical cancer, people with severe disabilities, children with no health insurance, and seniors who need a little bit of help to continue living in their own homes. But most Arizonans – and most policymakers – want the state budget to reflect the values they hold dear for our families and our communities.

The Goldwater Institute and some legislators are saying that there is no choice other than spending cuts like these to get to a balanced budget. They say they are forced to make budget cuts that threaten the health, safety, education, and security of children and families. But we know this is not true. Balancing the budget will be a matter of choices. And Arizona *does* have budget choices.

Lawmakers should take a look at recommendations that have been made by community leaders and citizens' groups over the years to strengthen state revenue collections. These choices range from collecting more of the taxes that are already owed, to eliminating tax deductions and tax credits that are not achieving a purpose, to suspending new tax cuts that are scheduled to be phased in.

Certainly with a budget deficit this large, government spending should be examined to see if it is efficient and helping more families achieve the American dream. Our tax policy should be held to the same standard. Tax credits should only remain if they are making our state stronger.

Now is the time when parents, grandparents, businesses and students are looking to our leaders to help us survive this economic downturn – and to come out stronger. Children's Action Alliance looks forward to working with legislators and our new governor on real budget analysis to help Arizona overcome the challenges ahead.