New Kansas group calls on Legislature to consider tax hike

January 8, 2010, 7:55 a.m. Updated: 8 January 2010, 4:30 p.m.

Topeka — A coalition of health care and education groups on Friday said state budget cuts have caused serious harm to Kansas and called on legislators to consider tax increases to bridge the revenue shortfall.

“More cuts will send Kansas into a decline from which it will take years to recover,” Kansans for Quality Communities said in a statement.

The group urged the Legislature, which starts the 2010 legislative session on Monday, to refrain from any more budget cuts.

And the coalition said the Legislature should raise more revenue and consider tax increases, closing various sales tax exemptions, delaying the phase-out of some tax cuts, and also separating the state tax code from federal tax cuts that would reduce state revenue.

But when asked which sales tax exemptions should be eliminated, coalition members said they didn’t have a specific proposal.

The state budget was cut five separate times in 2009, for a total of nearly $1 billion, and still lawmakers face a nearly $400 million shortfall in the next fiscal year.

The coalition said those cuts have devastated services to the poor, elderly and people with disabilities, and hurt schools and public safety.

“Our communities and our way of life are at risk,” said Cindy Rush, a certified nurse aide at a Topeka nursing home, and representative of the Kansas Health Care Association.

Mike Hammond, executive director of the Association of Community Mental Health Centers, said state budget cuts have put “the public mental health system at a breaking point.”

Community mental health centers, which treat 123,000 Kansans each year, have sustained state grant cuts of 65 percent over the last three years, Hammond said. “These cuts have gone too far. We can no longer cut our way out of this crisis,” he said.

Shannon Jones, director of the Statewide Independent Living Council of Kansas, said funding cuts for home- and community-based services will mean more vulnerable Kansans requiring more expensive nursing home care. “For the elected official, the easiest task is to cut programs and people. The more difficult task is saying to the citizens of Kansas that there are real and genuine needs for some of our fellow Kansans and we are not going to abandon them,” Jones said.

Public school representatives said education cuts have produced larger classrooms, fewer instructional days and decreases in programs designed to help students who are struggling.

Karen Godfrey, vice president of the Kansas National Education Association, noted that the state has lost revenue through recent tax cuts that legislators said would increase economic development. “But we know that a strong education system is one of the most critical elements to economic development,” Godfrey said.
The coalition includes the Association of Community Mental Health Centers of Kansas, Disability Rights Center of Kansas, InterHab Resource Network for Kansans with Disabilities, Kansas Area Agencies on Aging Association, Kansas Association of Public Employees, Kansas Association of School Boards, Kansas Families for Education, Kansas Health Care Association, Kansas National Education Association, Kansas Organization of State Employees, Statewide Independent Living Council of Kansas, and United School Administrators of Kansas.