Written by Sharon Rolenc - Minnesota News Connection
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ST. PAUL, Minn. - With a looming $6.2 billion dollar state budget deficit, outgoing Gov. Tim Pawlenty has been in the spotlight recently, blaming public employee unions for a big part of both state and national financial woes. Pawlenty has said public employees' union members are overpaid, and receive benefits he considers excessive.

Eliot Seide, executive director of *AFSCME Council 5*, the union that represents state workers, calls those claims myths, and counters that public employees are playing an important role in Minnesota's economic recovery.

"AFSCME members make on average $38,000 a year, and they buy necessities, not luxuries - and that's the kind of spending that will pull Minnesota out of this consumer-driven recession. Every time Governor Pawlenty cuts a public employee's job, Main Street loses a customer. As more stores shutter their doors, the last thing we need is more layoffs," said Seide.

Seide pointed out that the average AFSCME salary is lower than Minnesota's average per capita income of just under $42,000. In his view, the state is spending its money effectively with public employees, who take care of Minnesotans on the roads, as well as in schools, hospitals and nursing homes.

According to U.S. Census data (www.census.gov/govs/apes/about_the_survey.html), Minnesota has about 36,000 full-time public employees, or 71 government workers for every 10,000 people. That means AFSCME members are working harder with fewer resources, said Seide.

"The Minnesota state workforce is the tenth leanest, and one of the most productive in the nation,” said Seide.

Pawlenty has called public pensions one of the driving forces behind many local budget crunches, across the country. Seide says AFSCME retiree pensions are far from extravagant, at about $13,000 a year.

"Combined with Social Security, it's the difference between dignity and poverty. Ninety percent of retired public workers stay in Minnesota, and their pensions fuel the local economy, and keep seniors self-sufficient," said Seide.

Seide believes the impact of losing pensions would have a more disastrous effect on the local economy in Greater Minnesota, where benefit payments add $1.25 billion to the economy each year, according to the state retirement systems.