



Patrick's budget chief knows the pain of cuts

Leslie Kirwan is no stranger to financial challenges or the anguish they cause. Now she's looking at a projected \$1.3 billion gap.

By Lisa Wangsness, Globe Staff | February 27, 2007

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Leslie Kirwan marshaled her shaken staff at the Massachusetts Port Authority to assess the financial damage.

As the agency's budget chief, she spearheaded the creation of a restructuring plan that ultimately helped Logan International Airport regain its footing but required deep layoffs. After personally dismissing more than a dozen staff members, Kirwan assembled her department to discuss the situation, and broke into tears.

"I think the fact that she was as distressed as she was by the layoffs was an indication of how much she valued and respected each member of her staff and also how she understood how essential it was to do this reduction if the authority was to be financially viable," said Elizabeth Taylor, Massport's current director of finance.

Kirwan, now Governor Deval Patrick's chief financial officer, is no stranger to extraordinary financial problems or the pain of grappling with them. Her latest challenge is as daunting as any she's faced. Today she must turn out a budget that tackles a projected \$1.3 billion budget gap and helps meet Patrick's campaign pledges to lower property taxes, improve education, bolster public safety, and expand the economy.

Kirwan, the state's first female administration and finance secretary, is also charged with leading the board of the Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector Authority, which is implementing the state's health insurance plan. She has been working to become an expert in a new field, even as she is helping to shape it.

As her new boss has repeatedly pointed out during his first weeks in office, Kirwan is obliged to monitor more than 30 other boards through a designee, a situation that Patrick hopes to change through his restructuring of state government.

"It's been a real challenge," Kirwan acknowledged with a quick smile in a recent interview at her State House office. "We're all spread very thin. Sometimes we all get a little hysterical around here. . . . We're just starting to know the answers and not just all the questions."

But Patrick, who surprised Kirwan by hiring her soon after he met her in late November, said his new budget aide understood what she was getting into.

"I would say when she came into the interview she still wasn't sure that she wanted the job," he said in a recent interview. "Of the many candidates, she appreciated the enormity of the challenge."

Kirwan, 49, speaks quietly but steadily and with confidence, often employing a light, dry sense of humor. A stuffed Grinch, her "budget season mascot," sits on the chair next to her desk.

"The A&F secretary is basically the person at the cocktail party who takes away everyone's drink and tells them it's time to go home," said Charlie Baker, chief executive of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, who served in the post under two former governors, William F. Weld and Paul Cellucci, and hired Kirwan as his undersecretary in 1995.

Though some have questioned Kirwan's heft as a negotiator, Baker and other former colleagues say that underestimating her would be a mistake.

"She's smart, she's tough, and she knows how to operate in a political environment," said Ray Howell, a former Weld press secretary who now runs a public relations company.

Growing up in Cambridge, Kirwan showed signs that she might head in a different direction than her artsy parents and siblings. Her younger brother Robert recalls her sitting in her bedroom listening to Celtics games on the radio, recording each player's every shot in a homemade box score. She also made audio recordings of 20 or so Sherlock Holmes movies on television and memorized every word, he said, so she could say the lines before the actors did the next time the movies came on. "We thought she was a magician of some kind," he said, "but what it really was was incredible focus."

After graduating from Harvard, Kirwan landed a position as an aide in the Cambridge mayor's office, where she met her husband, Kenneth Goode. Goode, now a vice president of business development at MassDevelopment, lives with Kirwan in Arlington; they have two boys.

During her first year on the job, Proposition 2 1/2 passed, and Kirwan found herself fascinated by the law's financial impact on communities.

Realizing she had found work she loved, she enrolled at the John F. Kennedy School of Government and after graduation landed a job in the state Department of Revenue's Division of Local Services. Under the late Ed Collins, her mentor and predecessor as deputy commissioner, she worked with local leaders from across the state on financial planning, property tax classification, and other issues.

Collins, she said, taught her that "sometimes you had to give out strong medicine, but you also had to do it in a way that was respectful of their position . . . to help them solve the problem themselves, instead of just impose it."

Mayor John Barrett III of North Adams said local leaders who felt financially strapped and ignored during the early years of the Weld administration saw Kirwan as a critical link to state government, someone who came to their meetings, returned their phone calls, and offered sympathy without caving in to their demands.

The relationships and experience she built during those years may prove an asset to Patrick, a political novice who promised during the campaign to help improve relations between state and local government.

But while Kirwan was at Massport, she clashed with a state senator from East Boston over the relationship between the authority and the communities in his district, which hosts Logan. Robert E. Travaglini, now the Senate president, initially expressed frustration over Kirwan's appointment, sources told the Globe late last year. But aides to both say they have regular meetings and are getting along well.

Patrick's financial agenda, however, has already had some setbacks. His municipal relief package, released earlier this month, met with criticism in the Legislature. And Patrick's proposal to raise \$295 million next year by closing so-called corporate tax loopholes has provoked fury from the business community.

Kirwan is reluctant to make lofty promises about the governor's first budget. Only over time, she said, can Patrick fulfill his longer-term promises to make government more efficient and to improve the state's economy.

"We're going to make a really good stab, a first pass at getting the budget balanced in a non-gimmicky way and make a good-faith first step to accomplishing the governor's priorities," she said. "And that's going to take a whole bunch of tools; it's not going to be one big solution."

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