Florida Policy Institute eyes "long-term" impact on state's residents

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Florida Policy Institute wants to broaden the debate around growing the state economy beyond tax cuts and incentives, and bring a stronger focus on the need to invest in higher education, transportation and affordable housing.

The independent, nonpartisan nonprofit aims to “bring a voice that has not been heard enough in the state of Florida,” said Joseph Pennisi, executive director of the institute, which is in Lake Mary. “It takes will and wisdom to look at long-term investments and long-term payoffs in the state's economy.”
Institute says it thinks in terms of “common sense” policy, which could give Floridians widespread prosperity.

“We all agree with the final result we want for Florida,” Pennisi said of the state’s other think tanks, “but we disagree with the best means to get there.”

Its latest report, published Wednesday, is critical of a recent House resolution, which urges Congress to establish Medicaid block grants.

“Floridians deserve a thoughtful, fact-based Medicaid policy discussion before the Legislature acts to fundamentally change a program that provides a lifeline for 4 million Floridians,” the report says.

Florida Policy Institute was established in 2014 and brought Pennisi on board in 2015. The institute’s staff of six has produced reports on issues ranging from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and juvenile justice to the potential repeal of the Affordable Care Act and the impact of financing the state’s Medicaid program through block grants.

The institute has created a citizens’ Guide to the Florida Budget on its website and has started to hold community forums in different corners of the state to talk about the budget process.

“We want to raise awareness about how important the state budget is in people’s everyday lives and get them to understand that they can make an impact by reaching out to their elected officials,” Pennisi said.

Florida Policy Institute is part of a network of more than 40 independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research and policy organizations called the State Priorities Partnership. In response to the reduction of services to low-income and vulnerable populations, the partnership took shape in the early 1990s with the backing of the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

“Until recently, Florida was the largest state without a representative in the network,” said Pennisi, who is a graduate of Georgetown University and the University of Pennsylvania and spent most of his career in New York holding leadership roles in state and local government.

One of the institute’s current projects focuses on criminal justice reform, particularly juvenile justice.

“You’ve got a tremendous amount of dollars going into the correction system, but we’re locking up people who are in custody because of mental-health issues, because of substance-abuse issues,” Pennisi said. “Wouldn’t it better to take those dollars that deal with those problems inappropriately in the correctional system, downsize that system, and deal with those issues that [people] have?”

The institute gets most of its money from Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation in Sarasota, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a Baltimore-based private philanthropy focused on improving the lives of vulnerable