

Families to lawmakers: Don't cut quality of life

Lean times » Utah Legislators consider slashing millions of dollars from social services

By Julia Lyon - The Salt Lake Tribune

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Deep cuts proposed for the Department of Health appeared to salvage other programs defended by Utahns Wednesday. Winners ranged from parents with autistic children in preschool to low-income women with breast cancer relying on publicly-funded insurance.

Renaë Bolson, a single mother diagnosed with breast cancer, said Medicaid's coverage helped keep her alive. Without it, "my family would have been planning my funeral," Bolson said.

Under revisions made Wednesday, state money that flows to local mental health programs would be cut \$3.5 million in 2010, instead of \$8.6 million.

Rather than eliminating Meals on Wheels for thousands of vulnerable seniors, a far fewer number would lose their access to the programs.

But other cuts remained deep, sparking criticism from department heads. Many proposals originated with legislative staff, not people running programs, said Lisa-Michele Church, executive director of Human Services.

She rejected the implication that the department had millions of dollars of inefficiencies and fat. With the \$44 million in proposed cuts, "I've got this really wounded body I'm going to be left with after the session," Church said.

A proposed \$3.5 million cut in 2010 would eliminate Adult Protective Services and its 45 positions. It annually investigates about 2,400 allegations of abuse, neglect and exploitation of the elderly and other vulnerable adults. About 30 percent of the complaints are found to have merit.

Officials believe cutting the program would endanger residents and make Utah the only state in the nation without such services. Law enforcement or other agencies would likely need to increase their involvement, which would cost the state money for training, said Nels Holmgren, the director of the Division of Aging and Adult Services.

A proposal to reduce cuts to substance abuse programs hinges on making people help pay for their treatment. But that could lead to the further loss of federal Medicaid dollars and is unrealistic in some cases, said Eric Schmidt, the executive director of Odyssey House, which provides residential and outpatient treatment.

"They've already proven their substance abuse problems have disintegrated their lives," he said.

About 200 people had packed Wednesday's hearing, begging lawmakers to spare programs ranging from disability services to the four autism preschools.

Dozens of parents, many holding photos of their children and crying as they spoke, convinced lawmakers to not close the schools.

The families suggested the state put more money into the program, which has a waiting list of nearly 300. They told stories of children who were once mentally locked away now emerging to say, "I love you."

"If you take this away, that is nothing but pure cruelty," said Gloria Stratford, whose 4-year-old grandson attends one of the schools. The boy who once kept his grandmother up at night, wondering why they couldn't connect, now laughs with her, she said.

Advocates urged lawmakers to save Medicaid programs by temporarily tapping rainy day funds, repaying them with expected federal stimulus funds.

"Economic recovery is on its way from the federal government," said Lincoln Nehring, Medicaid director for the Utah Health Policy Project. "There are resources within the state that [could] help mitigate the economic challenge that we currently face."

Before the meeting, nearly a dozen Medicaid enrollees gathered in a nearby room for a round-table news conference to underscore how much they rely on the services they receive. All of the programs are slated to be slashed or eliminated.

Melissa Gilley said the Baby Your Baby program helped to ensure the safe delivery of her daughter. She became pregnant during her second year in college, when she didn't have a job or health insurance and was abusing alcohol, she said.

"For me it made a huge difference. I had quite a few complications early on," she said.

Josh Rhees, who has cerebral palsy, lauded the Medicaid Choices Waiver, which pays for the home health aides who help him do things like bathe and dress, freeing up his wife to help take care of the couple's five children.

"Without this Medicaid physical disabilities waiver program, my wife would be physically unable to get me up and dressed and showered and able to go to work and be able to pay off our bills -- and live a normal happy life like I live right now," he said.

"You're cutting people's quality of life. We're real human beings here, we're not just another number," said LouAnne Stevenson, who said she would become suicidal without treatment for clinical depression.

She is one of 5,800 people who may lose Medicaid coverage under a proposal to cut off care to people making more than 75 percent of the federal poverty level.

Several speakers said the so-called savings would result in more costs in the future. For example, cutting 5,600 women from Medicaid-funded prenatal care could result in astronomical hospitalization costs, according to March of Dimes spokesman Stephen McDonald.

A study of mothers who didn't receive prenatal care showed their babies were two times more likely to be born prematurely and severely underweight and need time in intensive care, he said.