

Utahns speak to Legislature about need for health assistance

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By John Daley – KSL.com

Rough times appear to be ahead for thousands of Utahns who depend on health care assistance from state government.

On Capitol Hill, a dire economy could mean deep reductions in spending; which could cut away at the very safety net many Utahns rely on. Today more than 75 people were on the list to testify before the legislative committee that oversees spending on health care and human services.

Josh Rhees has cerebral palsy and works as a loan bank assistant. Medicaid pays \$80 a day for Robert, his nursing assistant. Rhees, a father with a 1-year-old, now fears that funding will be cut. He says, "I wouldn't be able to get up in the morning and shower and bathe and go to work and proceed a normal life."

From schools to roads, lawmakers are considering deep cuts. State lawmakers are looking at a 7 percent budget cut overall this year and a 15 percent cut for next year -- cuts which would mean tens of millions of dollars slashed from health care and human services.

The cuts may be felt most sharply by the young, disabled and elderly who depend on state funding. Sen. Allen Christensen, R-Morgan County, says, "Trying to decide which programs are going to be saved and which are going to be cut is what keeps me awake at night."

At a press conference before the committee hearing, it seems everyone has a poignant story. Medicaid recipient Miriam Hyde says, "I know the agony of mental illness. I've attempted suicide any number of times. I've been in jail. I lost custody of my children for a while. Don't send me back there, please."

Medicaid advocates urge lawmakers to dip into the state's \$400 million rainy-day fund rather than cut programs. Rhees says, "It would be significant of me maybe even losing my job and losing my family, and I would essentially rather die than go to a nursing home."

Pediatrician Tom Metcalf, with Utah Health Policy Project, says, "The economic consequences for Utah, as well as the health consequences for people, are just in incredible."

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