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Utah advocates lament fraying of social safety net

Low-income » Poverty summit addresses shrinking dollars, rising need.

By Cathy McKittrick
The Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 10/04/2009 08:32:37 AM MDT

With Utah lawmakers facing a possible \$750 million budget shortfall next year, low-income advocates fear the vulnerable people they fight for every day will be the first to feel the ax.

Among the government-funded programs at risk of getting slashed are Medicaid, food stamps and general assistance.

"I'm hoping to dispel myths about who's on general assistance," Denise Anderson told those in attendance Saturday at Utah's sixth annual People's Summit on Poverty at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral.

The 52-year-old mother of three grown sons described how her life fell apart when her sometimes-abusive husband of 21 years told her he was gay.

Suddenly single, Anderson experienced severe depression and said she was also diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder.

As she tried to put her life back on track, Anderson went on general assistance. That program gives recipients \$261 a month to help them survive as they wait to be approved for Social Security disability benefits, a process that can take up to two years.

That paltry sum enabled her to buy gas, toilet paper and shampoo -- items now seen as luxuries since her aid eligibility ended in July.

In the Legislature's last session, an unprecedented budget crunch led to decreasing general assistance from two years to one year per recipient.

"There were 1,550 people on it then. By the first of this month, 450 to 500 have dropped off," said Tim Funk, a

low-income housing advocate with the non-profit Crossroads Urban Center.

"We are afraid that the geniuses in the state Legislature will eliminate general assistance altogether," Funk told the group.

Eric McDonald, who volunteers at the Crossroads food pantry, spoke of the plight of the uninsured, a situation he now knows firsthand.

"I'm classified as a glorified tramp right now," McDonald said. After a decade of steady employment, he was abruptly laid off and is now homeless.

"Right now Medicaid doesn't really help the homeless," McDonald added.

Proposed federal health care reforms are poised to significantly expand access to Medicaid, said Lincoln Nehring, Medicaid policy director for the Utah Health Policy Project.

That possibility could help span the gap between Utah's 250,000 uninsured and the 25,000 that qualify for the state's Primary Care Network, Nehring hopes.

However, he fears that Utah's Medicaid program will face even deeper cuts during the coming budget sessions.

Under the federal stimulus, food-stamp eligibility guidelines were relaxed to provide more aid for the homeless.

That change caused a recent surge in the number of participating Utah families from 52,000 to 90,000, said Bill Tibbits, who directs the Anti-Hunger Project for the Crossroads Urban Center.

Unfortunately, old rules will be reinstated next October.

"The reason we want to talk about it today," Tibbits said, "is that one year from now, those people get kicked off the program."

Low-income advocates pledged Saturday to help lawmakers understand their concerns and to urge them to explore other solutions besides cutting.

"Will they access the rainy day fund this year?" asked Linda Hilton of the Coalition of Religious Communities. "Last year they said it wasn't raining hard enough. Many of us feel like we're in the ark."

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Corroon pledges support, dodges question

Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon says the county is trying to cut elsewhere to spare human services.

"For those on the brink of poverty, recessions never end," Corroon said at the People's Summit on Poverty. "They always live through tough times."

Those times could get tougher for the state's most populous county, Corroon added, as it aims to cut \$15 million more from a budget recently trimmed by \$25 million.

"We are protecting human services and cutting administrative costs," Corroon said. "We can't control the state. If they cut programs, it will hurt us."

The Uth Democratic Party recently launched a Web site to raise funds for a potential Corroon run for governor in 2010.

"I might take a look at the governor's race, but I haven't committed to anything," Corroon said. "My focus is to get through the next few months and make sure we're ready for next year."

Should he take that leap, one thing is certain, Corroon added.

"I would need your votes and your money."

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