

Could state cuts lead to suicides?

Mental health advocates rally to prevent further reductions in service.

By William Hershey

Staff Writer

11:19 PM Wednesday, May 6, 2009

COLUMBUS — In what could be a preview of coming state budget protests, advocates for Ohioans with mental illness and addiction problems rallied outside the Statehouse a day after Gov. Ted Strickland's administration revealed a gaping budget hole.

More cuts in the current budget and the proposed new two-year budget now under consideration would mean "more suicides" and more people in jail instead of treatment, Robert Mullins, public affairs director for the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board for Montgomery County, said after the rally on Wednesday, May 6.

Budget director Pari Sabety and Tax Commissioner Richard Levin on Tuesday revealed the state faces a shortfall ranging from \$600 million to more than \$900 million for the fiscal year that ends June 30. It's likely the state will have to use part of its \$942 million "rainy day" fund to fill the gap.

Strickland had planned to use the "rainy day" fund for the new two-year state budget that takes effect July 1.

Gayle Channing Tenenbaum, co-chairwoman of the Coalition to Protect Ohio's Future, said without new taxes — which Strickland and legislators have ruled out — the budget hole and plans to use the "rainy day" fund mean the budget will have a gap of at least \$1 billion for the next two years. Her coalition includes health, human services and education groups.

The crisis presents some unpleasant choices, Tenenbaum said. In making cuts, lawmakers and Strickland will have to choose between spending for education or "protecting the most vulnerable: our abused and neglected children, our elderly who are abused, our people with mental illness."

The announcement from Sabety and Levin came less than a week after the Democratic-controlled House passed its version of the \$54 billion two-year budget under consideration by the Republican-controlled Senate.

In a meeting with reporters, Strickland denied he held back revenue estimates so Republicans in the Senate would have to make the tough decisions.

Republicans today will have a chance to question Sabety before the Finance Committee. Staff Writer Laura A. Bischoff contributed to this report.

Find this article at: <http://www.daytondailynews.com/news/ohio-news/could-state-cuts-lead-to-suicides-110376.html>

Bad income tax numbers may force big cuts for already-overtaxed safety net programs

By Bill Cohen - May 6, 2009

Big spending cuts in programs for the poor, elderly, and mentally ill could be looming, now that Ohio legislators have learned they may have billions of dollars less to spend during the next two years than some had hoped for. Statehouse correspondent Bill Cohen reports.

Mental-health cuts carry hefty price, advocates warn Ohio legislators

Wednesday, May 6, 2009 10:40 PM

By Alan Johnson

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

With another budget hole looming, advocates for behavioral health care laid it on the line today to state officials: pay now or pay a lot more later.

An unusual cast of characters - a county commissioner, hospital emergency room director, judge, police chief and school superintendent - agreed that cutting mental-health and addiction funding will ring up a much bigger bill later in terms of arrests, incarceration, hospitalization and deaths.

"It does us no good to cut these services in the human safety net now," said Franklin County Commissioner Paula Brooks. "Now is when they're most needed."

Police Chief James Cook of Highland Heights in Cuyahoga County said one in every 10 police calls involves a mentally ill person.

"They pose a danger to the individual, the individual's family and the police officers that are involved," he said.

The Ohio Coalition for Healthy Communities, whose 27 members represent organizations that serve Ohioans with mental illness or addiction issues, converged on the Statehouse today on the heels of news that the Ohio Senate must cut nearly \$1 billion from the proposed two-year budget because of revenue shortfalls.

Coalition members stressed that studies consistently show that \$1 spent on behavioral health care now will avoid \$11 in spending down the road for emergency room care, jail, prison and other services.

Dr. Eric Anderson, director of clinical operations for the Cleveland Clinic emergency department, said the number of patients with mental-health issues seen in the emergency room quadrupled between 2000 and 2003.

"The state sees (behavioral care) as costs, but they should see them as investments," Anderson said.

Carol Oxley, superintendent of Lima City Schools, said adding mental health and social services at Freedom Elementary in her district - with the support of Ohio State University - helped propel the school from academic failure to excellence.

Cheri L. Walter, head of the Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities, added, "Every area of Ohio's behavioral health system has been stretched to breaking." The Ohio House added money to the budget proposed by Gov. Ted Strickland, but the total is still \$65million lower than the current two-year budget, Walter said. Preliminary data released today show that through April, total state tax receipts for the fiscal year that ends June 30 are \$541.3 million, or 3.7 percent, off estimates that were revised just before Christmas. Administration officials announced this week that the shortfall for the entire fiscal year is expected to be at least \$600 million and perhaps more than \$900million.

Today, Strickland defended his handling of the budget and his budget team in the face of blistering Republican criticism, saying his staffers are doing the best they can in an unpredictable economy with no alternatives being offered.

House Speaker Armond Budish, D-Beachwood, also defended his decision to use rosier revenue estimates that helped him add more than \$600 million in spending to Strickland's budget. He noted that one critic, Sen. John A. Carey Jr., R-Wellston, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said he plans to use the same higher revenue estimates. "I think it's unfair to say we acted any way but fiscally responsible," he said. "We did not have the tax results, nor could we have had the tax results, giving the timing."

In other budget news: The Ohio Chamber of Commerce called on lawmakers today to pass a one-year budget, instead of the traditional two-year plan, because "we simply believe today's unprecedented economic climate prevents anyone from accurately projecting state revenue."

While the Senate is slicing at least \$1 billion from the budget, charter schools might be in line for at least \$300million in additional funding.

"The most inhumane thing done in our state would be to cause charter schools to have to close their doors," Senate President Bill M. Harris, R-Ashland, said of the House cuts. "What happens to those young people? We're not going to do that." Asked where the money comes from, Harris said, "I don't know at this point. But we're looking and we'll find it."

Harris also made it clear that he prefers the current school-funding system over the plan developed by Strickland and House Democrats. Republicans appear ready to scrap the governor's "evidence-based" plan, which Harris called "flawed." Dispatch reporters Mark Niquette and Jim Siegel contributed to this story.

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New budget hole worries agencies

Social service groups could lose recent gains

By JIM PROVANCE

BLADE COLUMBUS BUREAU CHIEF

COLUMBUS - Representatives of social service groups that saw some of their funding restored last week in a vote of House Democrats said yesterday they were "devastated" to learn it all could be wiped out with the opening of a new budget hole as wide as \$900 million.

"From everything we're hearing from the Senate, they have to make tough cuts. I wouldn't want to be them right now," said Laura Moskow Sigal, executive director of Mental Health America of Franklin County.

Mental health treatment clients and advocates rallied outside the Statehouse to preserve funding that was added to the next two-year budget last week by House Democrats. That was before the other shoe dropped for the current fiscal year.

The estimated hole of \$600 million to \$900 million, exacerbated by dismal income tax collections in April, would be enough to offset every penny added to the governor's budget by the House before sending the bill to the Republican-controlled Senate.

Gov. Ted Strickland yesterday said there was no intent to drop the latest budget problem in the laps of the Republican-controlled Senate after House Democrats were able to take credit for restoring funding for public libraries, food banks, child welfare and adult protective service, and other social service programs.

Senate President Bill Harris (R., Ashland) said the chamber is prepared to wield the ax to chop the budget even as it seeks to add dollars for charter schools.

"We're going to find it," he said. "I don't know at this point [where], but we're looking." Both he and Mr. Strickland have taken tax hikes off the table as a possible solution to a problem that not only affects the current budget but will overflow into the next. Mr. Harris said the Senate is also not likely to turn away one-time federal stimulus dollars, but senators may have different opinions on how money should be spent so as not to set the state up for a tax hike two years from now to maintain that level of spending.

Toddie Moore, 49, of East Toledo, a client of the Mental Health and Recovery Services Board of Lucas County, was among those at the rally. Dealing with severe depression and bipolar disorder, she has been a client for 8 1/2 years. "We, who are already in recovery,

are trying to figure out how to help people who are just beginning their recovery when all these things are being cut," she said.

The budget bill that passed along party lines in the House last week would fund mental health services in 2010 at \$485.4 million, down from the \$523.2 million originally budgeted for the current fiscal year. The lower House figure is still higher than Mr. Strickland proposed. In the second year of the next budget, 2011, the level of spending was to climb to \$495.4 million.

"There is no new programming," Lucas County board member Karen Durniat-Suehrstedt said. "We've eliminated many of the supportive services down to bare bones, so that we're left with just the ability to fund core treatment services. The irony in that is that treatment without the support services may be doomed to fail."

One of the last things House Democrats did before sending the next two-year budget to the Senate was to fully restore \$10 million in funding for public libraries that Mr. Strickland had proposed cutting in his budget on top of a 10 to 15 percent automatic cut driven by a formula tied to the shrinking general revenue fund.

"When the budget rises, we do well," said Clyde Scoles, director of the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library system. "When it doesn't, we live with the formula. We only ask that they leave the formula alone and allow it to work."

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Ohio budget mess fails to stop funding requests

Budget mess fails to stop rally

Thursday, May 07, 2009

Aaron Marshall

Plain Dealer Bureau

Columbus -- A day after state officials revealed that plummeting tax revenue had probably left Ohio's next budget shredded, mental-health advocates rallied Wednesday, crying out for more money.

But as the squeaky wheel clamored for the funding grease on the Statehouse lawn -- as special-interest groups have done for decades every budget cycle -- it was becoming increasingly clear that the budget game has changed in 2009. The usual pleas to find money for worthy programs are running headlong into a budget brick wall that rose Tuesday and won't be coming down soon.

Tuesday is when state Budget Director Pari Sabety broke the news that the state is at least \$600 million in the hole this year from slumping tax revenue -- and will need to tap the \$948 million rainy-day fund to pay the 2009 bills.

That news has even worse implications for the 2010-11 budget, which relied on the state's rainy-day fund and much-too-rosy revenue estimates to make ends meet, placing it at least \$1.2 billion out of whack. The \$56 billion plan was passed last week by majority House Democrats and now sits in the Republican-controlled Senate, where lawmakers have about one month to figure out where to make drastic cuts to state agencies. Gayle Channing Tenenbaum, a human-services advocate who has prowled the Statehouse halls for decades, said the budget mess means the usual pleas for money are falling on deaf ears.

"I just don't think they can hear that right now," she said. "I think what the Senate is thinking is that they have been left with a huge problem, and they have to figure out how to meet these immediate demands."

One prominent Senate Republican predicted that resetting the expectations of advocates will be a painful process in the coming weeks. Complicating that process is the fact that House Democrats made it look easy to find more money by adding \$622 million in spending to the budget, using revenue forecasts that now seem pie-in-the-sky. "We have people coming to the state capital saying, Can you please fix these things?" said State Sen. Jon Husted, a Dayton-area Republican who served for four years as House speaker.

"And they are under some unrealistic vision because the House found all of this money - and are saying, 'Aren't you guys going to find money so we can solve our needs?' Well, they didn't find it, because it wasn't real and it doesn't exist."

Jim Mauro, head of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio, one of more than 100 people rallying Wednesday at the Statehouse, said the budget news "absolutely" makes it tougher for advocates to make their case for more funding.

"We aren't asking them for more money in the budget - what we really are asking for is a reprioritization of where the money is going to be spent," he said. Mental-health services are cut by \$65 million in the next budget over current levels in the plan passed last week. In his first public comments since Tuesday's news, Gov. Ted Strickland told reporters his stances against raising taxes and legalizing slot machines to bring more money in the door haven't changed.

The Democrat defended the work of his budget analysts, saying they had been "credible" and done as good a job - or better - as many national economic forecasters.

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