

Advocates say proposed cuts to mental health services would hurt all

Already overextended jails, hospitals would be strained, they say

By Kristi L. Nelson
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Proposed budget cuts to the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities will hurt more than mentally ill people and those who serve them, advocates say.

When programs helping the mentally ill are cut, it will cost the entire community, said Rebecca Gill, regional coordinator for the Knoxville chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

"I understand the need to save money ... but I think people don't understand how much of an effect this will have on the community, on police, on hospitals," said Gill, who said that such drastic cuts to programs will tax already overextended police forces, justice systems and health care facilities as untreated mentally ill people end up in jails and hospitals.

NAMI, Tennessee Mental Health Consumers Association and Tennessee Voices for Children all stand to lose funding July 1, putting at risk such programs as screenings, respite care for families with mentally ill children, and in-depth classes that teach coping skills to families and friends of mentally ill people.

"The families themselves have saved the state millions and millions ... by learning how to help their loved ones and how to diffuse situations," said former NAMI-Tennessee President Joyce Judge. "If it were not for these (programs), many more families would be calling on emergency services."

Removing or limiting them will increase the burden on mental health providers, many of whom also are taking a financial hit.

Helen Ross McNabb Center, for example, stands to lose \$175,458 under the proposed cuts, requiring the loss of five staff positions and at least four programs: Project for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness; Children and Youth Homeless Outreach; Alcohol and Drug Regional Training; and Co-Occurring Disorders, said Jerry Vagnier, McNabb vice president of operations.

Vagnier said funding for McNabb's Peer Support Program, a national model, will be cut by \$11,458. Forty-six of the state's 49 peer support centers would close by 2010, Gill said.

Cherokee Behavioral Health stands to lose only about \$5,000 in funding and doesn't expect to cut services, said CEO Dennis Freeman. But of those who have been receiving services elsewhere, Freeman said, "I'm sure some of those folks will find their way to our door. We are a safety-net provider."

Freeman said in the last quarter, Cherokee saw a 30 percent increase in the number of uninsured clients.

"We're essentially the only health program taking the uninsured," Freeman said.

Gill said if the budget passes, more than 16,000 mental health care consumers who were transferred from TennCare to the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities in January will no longer have access to community behavioral health "safety-net" programs.

"Only hospitalization will be available in the regional mental health institutes" such as Knoxville's Lakeshore, she said.

Advocates say that under Gov. Phil Bredsen's budget proposal, the state department stands to take a 13.1 percent cut — almost double the average cut (6.8 percent) of other state agencies in the budget.

The mental health department is trying to reduce

its budget by about \$37 million, said department Communications Director Jill Hudson.

"In choosing which reductions to make, we critically examined all of our programs and services to determine what kind of service delivery structure TDMHDD must and can provide during these tough economic times," Hudson said. "We attempted to preserve services and programs that target high-priority populations and those that have a substantial impact on reducing inpatient psychiatric hospitalization."

The department will make "every effort" to continue funding crisis services, clinical services and programs that serve the neediest and the poorest, and those that "reduce the need for inpatient psychiatric hospitalization," Hudson said.

"We are doing everything possible to minimize the effects of budget reductions on Tennesseans, our communities and our committed staff," she said.

State Sen. Tim Burchett, R-Knoxville, said he plans to propose a later amendment to the cuts and look at using some TennCare reserves for mental health services.

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“I think we’ve got our heads in the sand about mental illness. It should be our ‘polio’ issue for this generation. We should be addressing it with that much vigor,” Burchett said. “We’re not saving any money by (cutting funding). It will cost us exponentially.”

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