

Tennessee: Bredesen seeks mental health, trauma site cuts

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By:

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NASHVILLE — Seriously mentally ill Tennesseans could wind up in local jails or worse because of planned bed cuts at mental health institutes under Gov. Phil Bredesen's proposed budget cuts, advocates warned Tuesday.

Under other proposed reductions, local governments would be on a financial hook if deemed to be sending too many children into state custody.

And trauma centers run by hospitals would lose \$9.1 million. Erlanger hospital in Chattanooga alone could lose \$1.2 million in state funds under the administration's plans.

The proposals were outlined in the administration "omnibus" amendment to a budget-related bill that makes changes in state laws state officials say are necessary to begin grappling with a billion dollar-plus revenue shortfall. The amendment was presented in the Senate Tax Subcommittee Tuesday.

Sita Diehl of the National Association on Mental Illness of Tennessee told senators the administration's proposals will endanger regional mental health institutes' status as a "place of last resort" for people with psychiatric conditions who are deemed possibly dangerous to themselves or others.

The administration's plans call for slashing \$11.8 million in funding for beds and staff at Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute in Chattanooga and its sister institutions in Knoxville, Nashville, Memphis and rural West Tennessee.

Moccasin Bend's beds would drop from 150 to 125 by the end of the 2009-10 fiscal year that takes effect July 1 and ends June 30, 2010.

Finance Commissioner Dave Goetz later said such cuts are regrettable but necessary.

"We have a \$1.3 billion hole in our budget," Mr. Goetz said. "We are in an unprecedented reduction in revenues. ... We simply are beyond any ability to avoid some very serious action."

In a statement, Erlanger CEO Jim Brexler said, "I certainly hope the legislature will rebuff attempts to raid state trauma funding accounts that many of us worked so hard to obtain just two years ago."

He said Georgia's cuts to trauma centers provide a cautionary tale and show "how critical these funds are to maintaining a statewide trauma network."

"This type action will very likely lead to the closure of smaller, poorly funded centers in Tennessee and have long-term negative effects on larger Level One Trauma Centers like Erlanger," Mr. Brexler cautioned.

CUTS DETAILED

A legislative staff analysis of the Senate bill provides a first-of-its-kind detailed look at some of the impacts of the governor's budget cutting proposals.

They include:

Billing counties for outpatient and inpatient mental health evaluations for misdemeanants. The state could reap \$3.6 million.

Authorizing the state to recoup costs from counties that are "overcommitting" children to state custody that exceeds 200 percent of the state average. The state figures it will save \$7.5 million.

No longer requiring the state Department of Children's Services to serve people ages 18 and 19. The state figures about 83 teens of those ages now are being served, and the state could eliminate 97 positions and save \$5 million by no longer serving them at youth development centers. Federal stimulus funds would avoid making the actual cuts in the 2009-2010 budget year.

Another \$3.27 million would be saved by suspending statutorily mandated salary hikes for select employees including state troopers and electronic alarm techs (\$843,000) and assistant prosecutors and criminal investigators (\$1.29 million).

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