

Tennessee: Bredesen budget cuts to hit mentally ill, Erlanger

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By:

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NASHVILLE — Under Gov. Phil Bredesen's proposed budget cuts, mentally ill Tennesseans experiencing psychotic episodes may wind up in local jails because of planned bed cuts at mental health institutes, advocates warned today.

Local governments, meanwhile, would be on the financial hook if they are deemed to be "over-committing" children to state custody. "Over-committing" is defined as a level of commitment to state custody exceeding 200 percent of the statewide average. The move could shift \$7.5 million in costs from the state to locals.

The budget also would eliminate \$9.1 million in trauma center funding for safety-net hospitals.

The proposals were outlined in the administration's Senate Bill 2357, presented in the Senate Tax Subcommittee this morning, as lawmakers begin grappling seriously with what may be a \$1.2 billion revenue shortfall.

"It makes changes in permanent law that would be necessary to implement the reductions that have been proposed in the budget," said Budget Director Bill Bradley.

A legislative staff analysis of the bill provides a first-of-its-kind detailed look at some of the impacts of the governor's budget cutting proposals. Meanwhile, the administration is expected to come later with a major amendment detailing even more draconian cuts.

During today's hearing, Senate Minority Jim Kyle, D-Memphis, said administration officials told him "they used scalpels; they didn't use axes" as he explained some provisions.

The bill seeks authority to use about \$361 million in reserves or accounts, including the \$9.1 million in hospital funds. The trauma center fund comes from 2 cents of the 42-cent-per-pack cigarette tax increase for education passed in 2007.

Erlanger hospital in Chattanooga, which operates a Level I trauma center, last year received about \$1.2 million from the fund and was expecting a similar amount by June 30, an official said.

The bill also allows the state to save \$11.8 million by limiting forensic inpatient evaluations, cutting treatment beds and eliminating the jobs of 213 employees at regional mental health institutes operated by the state Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities.

Regional institutes such as Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute in Chattanooga would be limited to no more than 125 beds.

"They are really cutting the infrastructure below a safe" level, warned Sita Diehl with the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Tennessee, saying it will "result only in human tragedies for our families and our communities."

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