

DiGravio: Behavioral health and Medicaid cuts

By Vic DiGravio/Guest columnist

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NATICK —

Every day, thousands of people in Massachusetts receive treatment for a mental health or addictions disorder. People come to the Brockton Addiction Treatment Center, or Advocates in Framingham, for treatment and counseling that keeps them living and working in the community. Medicaid makes all of this possible by paying for these essential services.

But people could lose access to treatment if the 12 members of Congress, including Massachusetts' Sen. John Kerry, who are debating a massive \$1.2 trillion in spending cuts, decide to make Medicaid a target. Republicans and Democrats alike have come out with proposals to strip hundreds of billions of dollars from Medicaid in the name of deficit reduction.

The looming cuts are part of the debt-limit deal reached this summer. In exchange for raising the nation's borrowing limit, Congress promised to either slash \$1.2 trillion from spending or impose automatic budget cuts of \$1.5 trillion. That level of spending reduction will affect all Americans, but particularly those who already live on the edge.

Medicaid has been a safety net program for millions of Americans for decades. It provides critical support for those individuals struggling with addiction and mental health disorders, and enables them to lead satisfying, productive lives. As a direct result of these services, they can work, pay taxes, and support themselves and their families.

Without Medicaid and the behavioral health services it supports, many people in our communities will slip into destructive patterns with exacerbated behavioral and medical health problems. We would see increased demand for expensive emergency room care, and greater pressures on the already overtaxed criminal justice and corrections systems.

Everyone recognizes the need to wring inefficiencies out of the health care system. There are ways to do it without undermining a successful and cost-effective behavioral healthcare network of services. Both the private sector and the Legislature are experimenting with cost-control reforms that will make the overall healthcare system more efficient. Those efforts need to be carefully considered and assessed to make sure they are not leaving vulnerable individuals and families behind.

Budget cuts and deficit reduction are popular buzzwords on Capitol Hill. Let's not forget the people whose backs these cuts fall on - our neighbors, family and friends.

The 12 member "super committee" is now considering options for controlling spending and reducing the deficit. Their recommendations are due Nov. 23. Now is the time to contact Sen. Kerry and other committee members to let them know that Congress must preserve Medicaid, not cut it.

The health of our community and future generations depend on it.

Vic DiGravio is president and CEO of the Association for Behavioral Healthcare in Natick. He is a board member of the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare.