

Mass. Gov. Deval Patrick cutting \$2.4 million for program that helps people with severe mental illness

By Dan Ring

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BOSTON – Elfie E. Arocho, of Springfield, said her 26-year-old son is turning his life around with help provided by an intensive clinical program in Springfield for the severely mentally ill.

Now, she is concerned that Gov. Deval L. Patrick has announced plans to abolish the program.

“I would be devastated,” said Arocho, 46. “It would be horrible.”

Patrick is cutting the service to save money that will be used to finance the jobs of 84 case managers in the state Department of Mental Health.

The state expects to save \$2.4 million on an annual basis by eliminating the so-called Program for Assertive Community Treatment programs in Springfield and Chelsea. The Center for Human Development, a private, nonprofit agency, has run the program in Springfield under a contract with the state since 2002.

Without eliminating the two programs, the 84 case managers would be laid off, according to a spokeswoman for the Patrick administration.

Arocho said she couldn’t find anything that worked until she enrolled her son in the Springfield program about five years ago. Before that, her son would refuse to take medication and was in and out of hospitals, she said. He once grabbed her by the neck and attempted to choke her. She said she was so afraid of him that she couldn’t allow him to come home, forcing him to the streets.

The programs in Chelsea and Springfield each include 60 to 65 clients with severe mental illness, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Clients may also suffer from substance abuse and may have a history of violent or other serious crimes. People need to meet state Department of Mental Health requirements to enroll in the program.

The program uses a team approach to provide intense levels of psychiatry and nursing. The staff includes 10 highly trained people, including a psychiatrist, a social worker, a substance abuse specialist, a recovery specialist, registered nurses and people to help with a job and education.

Arocho said her son is living on his own and spending weekends with her. The team at the Center for Human Development keeps a close eye on him and assures that he takes his medications daily, she said. “He’s come a long, long way,” she said.

Patricia A. Dickson, 47, of Springfield, said the program is also improving the mental health of her daughter, who suffers from bipolar disorder with depression.

“I don’t know what I will do without this program,” said Dickson, whose daughter has been in the program for four years. “This is working for her and for us.”

Jennifer Kritz, a spokeswoman for the state Executive Office of Health and Human Services,

said other services in the same area are available to people served by the Springfield program. She said people will only be minimally affected by cutting finances for the program.

Kritz said it was a difficult decision. Earlier this year, the state laid off 100 case managers and 20 administrators in the state Department of Mental Health. In the wake of those layoffs, Kritz said, the state decided to preserve the 84 jobs instead of keeping the programs in Chelsea and Springfield.

She said the Service Employees International Union Local 509 also was a strong advocate for retaining the jobs.

Case managers provide state oversight for services offered by private, nonprofit agencies, according to the letter from the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill in Woburn to Dr. JudyAnn Bigby, secretary of health and human services. Case managers often intervene on behalf of families.

Case managers are needed, but the solution isn't to eliminate the programs in Chelsea and Springfield, the alliance said. The programs are "core services" that help people live independently and can mean the difference between life and death, the alliance said.

Ten such Programs for Assertive Community Treatment will remain around the state, according to the Center for Human Development.

James R. Goodwin, president for the Center for Human Development, the largest nonprofit human services agency in Western Massachusetts with 1,300 employees, said the program works well partly because it doesn't drop mentally ill people who miss appointments. Team members find people who miss appointments. In a traditional outpatient program, a mentally ill person can be barred for missing multiple appointments, Goodwin said.

"This is very different from most types of services," he said.

Goodwin said it will cost more for hospitalizations of people that could result from closing the program.

The program is expected to close around Jan. 20.

It costs about \$15,000 per year to treat someone in the "very intense" program, Goodwin said. However, it would cost \$700 to \$1,000 a day for treatment at a psychiatric hospital and \$30,000 a year for prison, according to the Center for Human Development.

Goodwin said the program is a national model. He said people receive a full range of services, including home visits by a psychiatrist.

"They are out there face to face with people, dealing directly with their problems," he said of team members. The state is planning to close the only such program in Western Massachusetts, Goodwin said.

"It's just unfair to eliminate a program that has this level of service . . . to preserve state jobs," Goodwin said.