

STATE HOUSE

NEWS SERVICE

MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATES HOPE CUTS WILL BE SPREAD

By Gintautas Dumcius , *State House News Service*

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, OCT. 14, 2009 – Advocates for mental health services on Wednesday called for lawmakers to expand the governor’s budget-slicing ability outside the agencies under his control, saying they had already been disproportionately affected by budget cuts tied to plunging state tax revenues.

Shaking a thick sheaf of signed petitions that urged Patrick administration officials to mitigate the expected cuts, the policy director of the Massachusetts chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) said the move was a “preemptive strike.”

“This is a message to the governor and the Legislature that we will not take it anymore,” said Tobias Fisher, the policy director, addressing several hundred advocates, individuals with developmental disabilities and their family members who had gathered by the Grand Staircase. “We’ve been cut, cut, cut.” He added: “We won’t take cuts anymore. I’ve been up more times than I can count to fight to restore cuts. We’re always the first in line for cuts.”

The Patrick administration in the next day is expected to announce a lower estimate of anticipated fiscal 2010 tax collections and then work off that estimate to make budget corrections that are expected to include spending cuts and could include other proposals that would need legislative approval.

Revenue Commissioner Navjeet Bal told lawmakers last week that a reduction in expected fiscal 2010 revenues of between \$400 million and \$600 million seemed appropriate.

“So there’s going to be some consolidations and cuts,” Lt. Gov. Timothy Murray told the News Service on Wednesday. “We’ve tried to be as sensitive as we can. There’s not a lot of options left.”

Numerous rounds of tax increases and a steady draining of rainy day reserves have not stabilized the state budget in the face of a prolonged economic downturn marked by still-rising unemployment and falling tax collections.

Lawmakers who passed the rally while on the way to other State House events echoed Murray’s comments. “All of the human service agencies are going to feel the major effects,” said Rep. Paul Donato (D-Medford). “Unfortunately, they have to be made. Human services programs are really the ones that take the brunt when the budget shortfalls are there.”

Added Rep. Theodore Speliotis (D-Danvers): “I don’t believe any agency will be spared.”

Patrick aides say he has not requested authority from the Legislature to include exempt areas, such as local aid, the Legislature, and constitutional offices, in his spending cuts. Some human services activists feel it’s appropriate to broaden the cuts in an effort to minimize the impact on vulnerable residents.

According to a chart handed out by advocates, funding for the Department of Mental Health fell to \$644 million in the fiscal 2010 budget from \$685 million in the fiscal 2009 budget.

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In a Tuesday letter to Gov. Deval Patrick, House Speaker Robert DeLeo and Senate President Therese Murray, addressing potential further cuts, 16 heads of mental health advocacy groups and agencies wrote that the “resulting disruption and pain caused by those spending reductions [should] be spread across all of government, and not be limited to those agencies currently subject to the 9C authority of the Governor.”

The groups that signed onto the letter included the Massachusetts Psychological Association, Parent/Professional Advocacy League, Statewide Mental Health Advisory Council, the Massachusetts Association of Behavioral Health Systems, NAMI, the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Inc., the Children’s League of Massachusetts, the National Association of Social Workers’ Massachusetts chapter and the Massachusetts Clubhouse Coalition, among others.

Karen McGravey-Gajera of Methuen called the Department of Mental Health the “thread my son hangs onto.” Her son Timothy was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 19, she said.

Now 27 years old, he spends most of his time in his bedroom, “protecting any visitors from the voices that torment him every day,” she said. “My son’s only means of reaching out to doctors, programs and medication come from his services from DMH.”

Aroldo Ferreira, a diversity coordinator at the Central Mass Recovery Learning Community, said “9C” cuts – so named because of the statute that gives the governor the authority to make the cuts – earlier this year unfairly hit mental health services for Latinos.

“A young man I know, who does not speak English very well, is now in a homeless shelter without people who speak his language around him to help with housing, or with work or with mental health support,” Ferreira said. “He will end up in a hospital in a crisis.”

With hundreds of people from the rally behind him, Fisher delivered 6,000 signatures to an aide outside Patrick’s third-floor office. Administration staffers had wheeled out a sign reading, “Staff Only Beyond This Point,” and placed it between the two secretaries’ desks in the lobby.

“I think it may be a bigger stack than last time,” Fisher told the aide, who nodded in agreement.

At around 3 p.m., a dozen protesters remained, milling around outside the governor’s office. The protesters had dispersed by 5 p.m. but are expected back Thursday as part of a continuous vigil they’re hosting in Patrick’s office to bring attention to human services programs and the likely consequences of budget cuts.

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