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RALLY BACKS MENTALLY ILL

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BOSTON - About 300 supporters of the mentally ill, including advocates from Western Massachusetts, rallied on Beacon Hill Wednesday, saying they are terrified of possible cuts in state-financed services.

People who suffer from mental illness and treatment providers marched to the office of Gov. Deval L. Patrick on Wednesday and delivered a letter asking him to spread out possible budget cuts. The letter was delivered with the signatures of about 5,000 people around the state.

"We need to preserve our funding," said Robert George, 38, of Wilbraham, who has Asperger syndrome and is a client of Aditus Inc. in East Longmeadow, a private, nonprofit agency that helps people find jobs and provides support services.

Patrick today is scheduled to hold a press conference to announce how much he might need to cut from the \$27 billion state budget to bring it back into balance.

Sandra J. Scott, 41, who suffers from depression, and Andre D. Whitlow, 48, both of Westfield, came to the event to support the Forum House in Westfield, one of 32 "clubhouses" in the state offering recovery rehabilitation for people with mental illness.

Scott and Whitlow said, "the Forum House needs to continue to receive state financing. They both use services at the Forum House."

Whitlow, who has bipolar disorder, said he fears losing a key support system.

"Where would I go?" he asked. "Would I just roam the streets for eight hours a day?"

During his press conference today Patrick is expected to update the estimate for state tax collections for the current fiscal year that ends June 30. The current estimate is \$18.978 billion.

Tax collections for September fell \$243 million below projections, forcing a revision for the fiscal year. Economic forecasters last week testified that Patrick would need to lower revenues for this fiscal year by between \$400 million and \$600 million.

The budget for the state Department of Mental Health for the current fiscal year was cut to \$644.3 million, down 6 percent.

Patrick cut about \$40 million from the department last year when he imposed emergency budget reductions.

"People are scared," said Vicker V. DiGravio, president of the Mental Health and Substance Abuse Corporations of Massachusetts, in Natick. "People are very scared."

DiGravio said mental illness is a chronic illness, but people can live and prosper with the right services.

Cynthia M. Roy, a fiscal spokeswoman for Patrick, said the administration can't make any promises at this point.

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