

Aid groups lobby for restoring state budget cuts

Drug treatment, child welfare took a big hit

By Ryan Keith
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SPRINGFIELD — Keith Kuhn is bracing for the implosion about to hit one of the state's service systems that can least afford it.

Kuhn, community director of the Gateway Foundation in Springfield, and other substance-abuse prevention and treatment center advocates are pleading for help after Gov. Rod Blagojevich slashed \$55 million in state money from their programs last week.

Gateway could see as many as 70 layoffs and up to 800 people turned away this year, an extended waiting list for service out to six months and some outpatient and residential treatment reduced or ended altogether.

Other providers say they could close down entirely, as the cuts also mean losing \$55 million in federal matching money.

"This is not an exaggeration," Kuhn said at a Statehouse news conference Monday.

They're part of a growing chorus of advocates warning what Blagojevich's \$1.4 billion in state budget cuts will mean for taxpayers and clients. From foster care to wrongly imprisoned inmates, the fallout will be painful, they say.

"It's a little more than a cut," said Marge Berglind, CEO of the Child Care Association of Illinois. "It's really digging into the bone."

House lawmakers will get a chance to try to reverse the cuts this week, but the outcome won't be resolved right away. The House returns today for three days of work, while Senate leaders made it clear last week they may not come back until the fall.

Some advocates predict their services and programs won't survive that long. So they're making a strong lobbying push for help now.

In Rockford, the Rosecrance substance abuse treatment centers could lose millions of dollars and be forced to turn away roughly 1,100 people the centers served last year, spokeswoman Susan Rice said.

Berglind's child-care group says \$45 million cut out of a \$330 million budget will mean much larger workloads for caseworkers who serve the state's 16,000 abused and neglected children in foster care.

Caregivers will lose nearly half of that \$45 million, including \$5 million intended to give foster parents a much-needed cost-of-living pay increase, Berglind said. Without that increase, some parents could decide to leave the system.

"This is kind of hitting you at the knees," Berglind said.

Environmental groups are decrying \$14 million cut from the state Department of Natural Resources budget, possibly eliminating more than 160 critical staff positions from eight divisions.

Hospitals will see much longer waits to get paid for serving Medicaid clients, with a \$530 million cut extending the state's bill-payment cycle from 90 days up to 131 days, according to a House Democratic analysis.

Community colleges saw a 5 percent increase lopped out. East Peoria-based Illinois Central College could receive \$300,000 less this year than last rather than getting more money.

Bruce Budde, the college's vice president of administration and finance, said officials aren't sure yet how to deal with the shortfall, but the college could tap into its strong money reserves to cope.

"When a cut like this comes so late in the process, really it wouldn't be fair to respond to the students with a tuition increase," Budde said.

And then there's the Downstate Illinois Innocence Project, which is losing a small amount of money in comparison to other programs at \$240,000. But project officials say it's vital.

The project aims to help prison inmates who make a strong case that they are actually innocent. Students at the University of Illinois at Springfield work with volunteer and contractual staff to investigate cases.

Larry Golden, the project's co-director and a UIS professor, said lawmakers have approved the \$240,000 each of the last two years to help hire full-time staff. But twice now, Blagojevich has cut it out, forcing the project to go back to private donors for more help.

Golden said there's a much greater need than the project is equipped to handle.

"This is really a very critical time for us," he said. "It's very critical because there's no other group that has it as a significant part of its work."

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