CLEVELAND.COM
Everything Cleveland

THE PLAIN DEALER

State budget standoff hitting children and school districts in Northeast Ohio

Child-care funds and adoptions halted

Thursday, July 09, 2009

Aaron Marshall

Plain Dealer Bureau

Columbus- Adoptions across Cuyahoga County are frozen, child-care providers are in danger of closing and school districts are having problems drawing up budgets with the next school year creeping closer each day.

Those are a few of the ripples being felt across Northeast Ohio from the state budget stalemate in Columbus. The situation has left county officials scrambling to figure out how to proceed now that state government has been put on ice.

For example, dozens of Cuyahoga County families ready to adopt children are in limbo as they wait to see how much assistance the state will offer families. The subsidy was $300 a month last fiscal year but was expected to be cut to $215 a month in Gov. Ted Strickland's last budget proposal.

But with budget talks stalled - and no immediate end in sight - counties can't move the paperwork.

"We have 20 or 30 adoptions that are pending and they are just sitting there," said Deborah Forkas, head of the Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services. "We don't know what the amount of assistance is going to be, so we can't move forward."

Forkas also has concerns about the possible subsidy cut. "It's totally inadequate," she said. "Ultimately, we are going to have people who are willing to adopt but won't be able to afford it."

Gayle Channing Tenenbaum, legislative director for the Public Children's Services Association of Ohio, said that hundreds of adoptions have been frozen statewide as lawmakers continue to bicker over how to fill a $3.2 billion hole in the 2010-11 budget.

Wednesday brought no solution as legislative leaders and Strickland continued to meet trying to end the impasse that has state government operating on a second, week-long interim budget that expires Tuesday. The temporary budgets give most state agencies 70 percent of their funding from fiscal 2009, divided by 52 to get a weekly allotment.

Strickland and Senate President Bill Harris, an Ashland Republican, are at loggerheads over Strickland's plan to raise $933 million by putting slot machines at Ohio's seven horse racetracks. The governor's "balanced budget framework" also includes $2.4 billion in cuts that would hit a host of areas, including health care, libraries, mental health and services for children and seniors.

Earlier this week, Strickland hinted that he might not sign another budget extension. That could mean an unprecedented shutdown of state government if talks drag on past the deadline.

Channing Tenenbaum said she has told her children's services groups to brace for more bad news.

"We told our county people to prepare for shutdown on Tuesday," she said. "Either be prepared for that or a budget that is more extreme than the governor's framework is what I've said."

It's like state government has already shut down for Sandra Kuluris and hundreds of other child-care providers across the state.

Kuluris, who runs Growing Wonders Child Care Center in Sheffield, got a letter Tuesday from Lorain County officials saying they won't be able to release any more state-subsidized funding because of the budget holdup.

And that's not for July. Kuluris hasn't yet received the child-care subsidy for May or June that flows to nearly half of her 68 kids.

"There is a real possibility of closing. Something has to happen here," she said. "I don't know if this is going to take weeks or months. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm hoping this will just be days."

Kuluris said she may be forced to send home the kids getting state vouchers if things don't change quickly. "If this doesn't clear up soon, people are going to be losing their jobs because they aren't going to have anywhere to send their kids," she said.

For Ohio school districts, the temporary budgets have prolonged the suspense about how much money they can expect from the state.

Dan Wilson, treasurer for the Mentor public schools, said he has been heartened by recent discussions about school funding reform. But he has had to spend "an awful lot of time" analyzing the impact of the various proposals that have been floated by the governor, House and Senate during the budget process.

The latest indication is the district will be hit with a slight reduction, which Wilson said wouldn't dramatically change his planning for the coming school year. The Mentor board, like many others, passes a temporary budget by June 30 and then a final budget - as required by state law - by Sept. 30.

Still, the budget uncertainty and the tough economy are special problems for districts deciding how much of a tax increase to seek. Aug. 20 is the filing deadline for the November ballot.

The same goes for districts with employee contracts ending during the summer. Mentor's contract with support staff is due to expire Aug. 1, but the union has agreed to delay the start of negotiations until the fall.

Other groups are bracing for big hits.

Ron Hill, CEO of the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging, said his agency, which serves more than 5,000 seniors, is preparing for a 30 percent cut as a worst-case scenario.

Hill said a deep cut will end open enrollment in the state's PASSPORT program, which provides services to seniors to keep them in their own homes. He said about 150 people a month would have to go on a waiting list, meaning about one in five would turn to the more expensive option of a nursing home.

"If it wasn't for our program, many of these people would be in nursing homes or just pass away," he said.

Plain Dealer Reporter Edith Starzyk contributed to this story.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

amarshall@plaind.com, 1-800-228-8272

©2009 Plain Dealer

© 2009 cleveland.com All Rights Reserved.