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Advocates say budget will have a body count

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The budget storm has passed, but Ohioans who use libraries, home care for the elderly, mental-health treatment or services for abused children will be counting casualties for weeks and months to come.

Those and dozens of other state-funded services will be hard hit by \$2.5 billion in cuts built into a controversial \$50.5 billion budget approved yesterday by state lawmakers.

Legislators are taking a "huge gamble" with the lives of the state's neediest families, said Joel Potts, executive director of the Ohio Job and Family Services Directors' Association.

"They're betting that we really don't need money for these people and they will get services somewhere else and children will not suffer," he said.

Rep. Vernon Sykes, D-Akron, chairman of the House Finance Committee, predicted the cuts may eliminate the jobs of up to 3,000 state employees.

"We cut \$2.5 billion in this budget," Sykes said. "We will suffer the hardship of those cuts."

Reductions in state aid for a host of programs and services are expected to trigger far higher job losses at the local level.

"We're looking at 30,000 to 40,000 jobs lost," said Gayle Channing Tenenbaum, chairwoman of the Campaign to Protect Ohio's Future, a coalition of health, human-services and education organizations. The lost jobs involve child care, services to the mentally ill and developmentally disabled, and county caseworkers.

"This is a budget that doesn't make anybody happy," Lynda Murray of the Ohio Library Council said after learning libraries will see a 31

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percent cut instead of 50 percent as feared.

Aside from the happy owners of Ohio's seven horse tracks, the much-debated budget produced stories of flat-out losers and "not-as-bad-as-we-expected."

Advocates for the elderly said \$30 million in cuts over the next two years to home- and community-based services for seniors will create waiting lists of up to 10,000 and force those who cannot wait into nursing homes at three times the cost to taxpayers.

"It makes no sense to deny in-home care and community-based services to older Ohioans who must rely on Medicaid for long-term care services," said Jane Taylor, state director for the AARP Ohio.

Potts said low-income families will have fewer services available because job training, family counseling and subsidized child care have all been slashed.

Among the most unhappy groups yesterday were mental-health advocates, who were given hope for restoration of \$69 million in proposed cuts, most to community-based services. Although lawmakers moved some money around, little if any was restored, according to the Coalition for Healthy Communities, a statewide group of behavioral care providers. They said the final budget will reduce addiction services by 30 percent and community mental-health services by 16.5 percent.

"This is the safety net and it's just been ripped apart," said Jim Mauro, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Ohio. He said the state might be violating state and federal law by failing to provide for "the most vulnerable of our citizens."

Cheri L. Walter, head of the Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities, added, "A vote for this bill is a vote to cut services to 100,000 to 150,000 Ohioans with alcohol, drug addiction and/or mental health disorders."

Separately, a community group home program for the mentally ill was allocated \$10.5 million for two years -- 43 percent less than the past budget.

"It's sick," said Terry Russell, executive director of the Ohio Adult Care Facilities Association. "This means people will be out on the streets and people will die."

Ohio's skilled-nursing homes, which were poised to reap a financial windfall in the Senate version of the budget, ended up losing \$184 million, amounting to a 5 percent funding cut, industry officials said.

Owners said that will mean reduced staffing and potential closure of some facilities that provide around-the-clock care for 80,000 frail elderly and disabled patients.

"As a result, nearly 90 percent of Medicaid-participating facilities will be losing money compared to what they received this last year," said Peter Van Runkle, executive director of the Ohio Health Care Association.

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Victoria Gresh of the Ohio Academy of Nursing Homes, said, "We've already cut staff and reduced expenses; unfortunately, some of our facilities simply won't be able to absorb the additional reductions and likely will have to shut their doors."

Ohio food banks fared better. They will receive a boost in state aid, but, they say, not enough to meet rapidly increasing demand.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, executive director of the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks, said the compromise allocates \$12 million a year to the feeding program. That's more than the \$8.5 million the group is now receiving, but below the \$17 million it requested. Demand has been rising 30 percent while food costs are up 26 percent.

"I'm conflicted," Hamler-Fugitt said. "We're pleased and thankful that the House and Senate recognized a need to fund food assistance. We're extremely grateful. Will it be enough? No, it won't be enough."

Ohio libraries won a moral victory when lawmakers restored \$143.5 million of \$227.8 million in cuts proposed by Strickland. However, they still face a 31 percent cut over the previous biennium, including a 20 percent reduction because of declining tax revenues.

Efforts to continue a two-year tuition freeze at public colleges and universities crumbled under the weight of a \$170 million cut in state aid to higher education.

As a result, students could have to dig deeper into their pockets, because those institutions can now raise tuition up to 3.5 percent in each of the next two years.

Officials at several universities said they were unlikely to increase tuition this fall because they'd already announced a freeze, but they will re-evaluate plans for the spring and next fall.

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