



# Impact of state budget cuts unclear for now

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State budget sparks angst for agencies

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YOUNGSTOWN — The funding cuts in the new state biennial budget passed late Monday by the Ohio House and Senate will adversely affect a broad range of county services, but the full local impact is still unknown, agency directors said.

“It’s not going to be good. I just don’t know how bad it is,” Judee Genetin, director of the Mahoning County Department of Job and Family Services, said of the financial prognosis for her agency.

“It’s a pretty substantial loss,” she said, adding that full details of the local impact likely won’t be known for a few days.

Welfare checks won’t be cut, but the new budget imposes deep cuts in funds that pay staff members to administer income maintenance, social service and child-support-enforcement programs.

The income-maintenance-control category, the money that pays staff to administer welfare programs, totalled \$118.6 million statewide in the state fiscal year that ended June 30, but that’s being reduced to \$87.326 million in this fiscal year and \$80.2 million next fiscal year.

State funds to administer social-service programs, such as child care, home health care and adult-protective services, totalled \$68.9 million statewide in the fiscal year that ended June 30, but they’re being cut to \$61.6 million this fiscal year and \$59 million next fiscal year.

State money to staff child-support enforcement statewide will drop from \$26.9 million to \$20.7 million, and then to \$19.8 million in the same series of fiscal years.

Cuts in program administration funds will mean slower service to clients, Genetin said.

“This has been an ongoing process. This isn’t a surprise,” Genetin said, noting that her department hasn’t replaced 14 people who have left since it imposed a hiring freeze in January 2008. The local JFS department has a staff of nearly 300.

The combined state and federal allocation to Mahoning County JFS was cut from \$26.1 million in 2007 to \$21.1 million this year.

Because of the budget crunch, the department's child-support-enforcement workers belonging to American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 3577 agreed this year to take an unpaid day off every two weeks to prevent layoffs in their unit.

But three of their supervisors, who belong to the Teamsters union, were laid off, two of them later being rehired in lower-paid jobs in income maintenance.

"Our caseloads are going up," Genetin said. "The workload is increasing, even though the number of staff that we have to process the cases is decreasing and may have to be decreased further," she added.

This summer, the local JFS will reorganize its staff to process cases faster, Genetin said. The state may help the department by giving it more flexibility in the use of certain categories of funds, she added.

At the Mahoning County Board of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services, Doris Primm, executive director, said the new budget reduces statewide funding this year for these services by \$12 million, amounting to a 31 percent cut.

"It's devastating," even if the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services absorbs some of the cuts as it did last year. "I don't know how much of this cut is going to be coming downstream" this year, she said.

The exact local impact of the reductions likely won't be known for another week or two, Primm said.

Most of the state money the local ADAS board gets is passed through by the board to local alcohol and drug prevention and treatment agencies or used as matching dollars for Medicaid. The local ADAS board coordinates publicly funded treatment programs for indigent people.

At the county mental-health board, which coordinates publicly funded mental-health programs, Ronald Marian, executive director, said he expects a 17 percent to 20 percent cut in state funds, amounting to an annual loss of \$1.5 million.

It's still unknown how much of the reductions will be absorbed by the Ohio Department of Mental Health, which operates state mental hospitals, and how much will be passed on to local boards, Marian said.

Until now, the board has been getting about \$8.6 million in state money annually out of its \$15 million to \$17 million annual budget. The board has only \$2 million in reserve.

State funding reductions will filter down to county boards and the community mental-health agencies they fund, meaning a reduction of services to clients, said Toni Notaro, director of administrative services at the local mental health board.

The funding cuts will mean establishment of waiting lists for service, and layoffs are likely in the community mental-health agencies, where personnel costs comprise 78 percent to 80 percent of the agency budgets, Marian said.

It has taken more than 40 years to build the state's community mental-health system, Notaro said.

"We're going backwards, and this is going to erode the fabric of care and our safety net here in the county. So it's very discouraging," Notaro said.

At the public libraries, the \$84 million statewide cut over two years, amounting to 11 percent, was far smaller than the 30 percent cut Gov. Ted Strickland had proposed.

The new state budget reductions mean Sunday hours, which were usually available during the school year in several larger branches, will be abolished, the Public Library of Youngstown and Mahoning County announced.

Cuts have already been made in the book acquisition budget, employee pay and library hours in the local system.