

Local board forced to cut services

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Due to a \$422,000 budget reduction from fiscal year 2009-10, the Preble County Mental Health and Recovery Board has been forced to make cuts and reductions in services, including those provided by their four local contracted agencies.

Samaritan Behavioral, Inc., Marie Dwyer Recovery Center, The Jefferson House, and Preble County TASC all will be affected by these reductions.

Kelli Ott, executive director of the PCMHRB, said many of the cuts were made through previous staff reductions, furlough days to remaining staff and offsetting additional reductions through board reserves, thereby sustaining many cuts within the administrative office. However, Ott added, cuts to the community were eminent.

"Almost half a million dollars cut is approximately 17 percent of our entire budget," Ott explained. "As much as we don't want these cuts to affect our community, the agencies which provide these services will also suffer."

The cuts to all four Preble County agencies may result in less prevention services offered in the community, longer wait time when accessing services, and decreased service availability.

In addition, the board was forced to reduce or terminate some agreements with community partners, particularly shared funding agreements for youth residential placements, contributions to the Family & Children First Council, and a reduction in funding to the school-based mental health program

The cuts are a direct result from state legislature cuts to the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Ohio Department of Alcohol & Drug Addictions. Ohio legislators were originally told an additional \$65 million, over and above the governor's budget framework, were allocated in the budget. When that budget was finalized, only \$14.7 million was allocated, which was simply moved from one line item to another.

Mental health advocates and legislators are now trying to find that missing "phantom" money. Mental health advocates hope to push for a corrections bill to get the money restored, whether the original problem was a line item error or an oversight. Some counties are even suggesting a lawsuit against the Ohio Department of Mental Health; Preble is not exploring this option at this time.

The PCMHRB helps fund services on a sliding fee scale, but also must match all Medicaid claims for Preble County residents who access care both within the county and throughout the state. Each year, Medicaid match increases, leading to the possibility of resources to those without Medicaid suffering cuts. Cutting local services to mentally ill affects not only those individuals and their families, but can eventually drive up health care costs by a "trickle down" effect.

"Hospitalization at a state hospital costs \$525 a day," Ott explained. "If someone is admitted to a private hospital because they don't have local supports in place, that hospital is faced with the cost. Eventually, because the hospital must adjust for added expense, costs are driven up to the 'average' consumer for health care."

Many will end up going to hospitals because they can't access local care. Eventually, the taxpayer will pay. Many Ohio counties have levies in place which help support boards and their agencies during federal and state cuts such as the most recent. However, those counties without local levies will be forced with major cuts and financial crisis, adding to the state and private hospital burden for care.

Preble County's current levy for the Mental Health and Recovery Board has been in place since the mid-1980s, and has been a valuable support to keep local services intact.

"We appreciate our community's awareness that with their support, we can bolster through the political and financial storms from state and federal levels," Ott added. "Our own financial crisis would be darker without our levy funding."

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