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Local officials urge state leaders to protect funding for safety net programs

The Ohio budget process may be close to being finished, but area residents still have time to encourage state leaders to make major changes to protect services for families in need.

The Ohio House of Representatives and the Ohio Senate have both passed their versions of the two-year state budget, and now legislative leaders from both bodies are trying to come up with one budget plan for the next two years. The House and Senate budget plans, along with the plan submitted by Ohio Gov. John Kasich, call for deep cuts to human services programs, local governments, education and other areas of the state government. These cuts will further harm the state's safety net system, which has seen its funding slashed several times in recent years.

"Ohio needs to raise revenue, instead of just continuing to cut the budgets to state programs," said Jack Frech, director of Athens County Job and Family Services. His agency has lost millions of dollars in state funding in the last three years and had to lay off staff and reduce or eliminate services. Now, Athens County Job and Family Services stands to lose more than \$1 million in the latest round of cuts.

The state income tax cuts from 2005 have reduced revenue significantly and are responsible for more than half of the current state budget deficit.

"The fiscally and morally responsible move for the state would be to roll back the income tax cuts that have not produced the jobs or revenue that were promised," Frech said.

And now that state leaders are expecting extra revenue to come in before the budget plan is finalized, it is vitally important that this funding be used to lessen the impact of some of these budget cuts and not used to provide for further tax cuts to benefit the rich.

Bill Dunlap, deputy director of the Athens-Hocking-Vinton Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board, explained that the last two-year state budget resulted in cuts of more than 30% in mental health and alcohol/drug addiction funding in Ohio.

"In the current budget proposal, 47 boards will receive a 30% reduction in mental health funding while 4 boards will receive no mental health funding at all. In addition, 37

boards will receive a 16% reduction in alcohol and drug addiction funding while 13 boards will receive no alcohol and drug addiction funding,” Dunlap said.

Under the current budget proposals, non-Medicaid community mental health funding will have declined by 76% over the last 10 years and non-Medicaid funding for community alcohol and drug services will have declined by 51%.

“These cuts have had real and devastating consequences that are reflected in the skyrocketing suicide rates, drug overdose deaths and increased costs to other systems such as corrections and nursing homes,” Dunlap said.

“The behavioral health system continues to urge the conference committee to increase the mental health budget by \$15 million and the alcohol and drug addiction budget by \$9 million in order to keep our system funded for fiscal year 2012 at the same funding level as fiscal year 2011,” Dunlap said.

Superintendent Eric Young of the Athens County Board of Developmental Disabilities said his Board stands to lose \$433,000 from the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities state subsidy in the budget proposal. In addition, the Board could also lose more than \$700,000 in federal Medicaid matching funds that could be drawn down with the state money, as it receives \$1.68 for every \$1 of state funding that is used for Medicaid services.

“We can’t afford to leave federal dollars on the table when there is so little money available in Ohio right now,” Young said. “In addition, changes in Ohio’s tax code will result in the Athens County Board of Developmental Disabilities losing a combined \$314,000 from the proposed Tangible Personal Property Tax and Public Utility Tax reductions. “

All of these funding reductions, coupled with growing expenses will force the agency to make adjustments by reducing costs, pursuing new revenue streams and prioritizing the programs and services that are offered.

“These reductions will result in increased caseloads, larger waiting lists for programs, and fewer resources to support our programs such as early childhood intervention, preschool, school age, adult day service, residential services, transportation and supportive employment,” Young said. “One big problem is that all local social service agencies are facing significant state funding cuts at once and this will force them to rely more heavily on and compete for local funding at a time when our local taxpayers are already over-burdened.“

All area residents are urged to contact their legislators to encourage them to maintain state social service funding in the new budget and to prioritize any new revenue projections for areas such as emergency food, mental health and addiction treatment services, early childhood programs, social services, education and home-based care for seniors and people with disabilities.