

# The Columbus Dispatch

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THURSDAY, MAY 7, 2009

## Mental-health cuts carry hefty price, advocates warn

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By Alan Johnson

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

With another budget hole looming, advocates for behavioral health care laid it on the line yesterday to state officials: pay now or pay a lot more later.

An unusual cast of characters — a county commissioner, hospital emergency room director, judge, police chief and school superintendent — agreed that cutting mental-health and addiction funding will ring up a much bigger bill later in terms of arrests, incarceration, hospitalization and deaths.

"It does us no good to cut these services in the human safety net now," said Franklin County Commissioner Paula Brooks. "Now is when they're most needed."

Police Chief James Cook of Highland Heights in Cuyahoga County said one in every 10 police calls involves a mentally ill person.

"They pose a danger to the individual, the individual's family and the police officers that are involved," he said.

The Ohio Coalition for Healthy Communities, whose 27 members represent organizations that serve Ohioans with mental illness or addiction issues, converged on the Statehouse yesterday on the heels of news that the Ohio Senate must cut nearly \$1 billion from the proposed two-year budget because of revenue shortfalls.

Coalition members stressed that studies consistently show that \$1 spent on behavioral health care now will avoid \$11 in spending down the road for emergency room care, jail, prison and other services.

Dr. Eric Anderson, director of clinical operations for the Cleveland Clinic emergency department, said the number

of patients with mental-health issues seen in the emergency room quadrupled between 2000 and 2003.

"The state sees (behavioral care) as costs, but they should see them as investments," Anderson said.

Carol Oxley, superintendent of Lima City Schools, said adding mental health and social services at Freedom Elementary in her district — with the support of Ohio State University — helped propel the school from academic failure to excellence.

Cheri L. Walter, head of the Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities, added, "Every area of Ohio's behavioral health system has been stretched to breaking." The Ohio House added money to the budget proposed by Gov. Ted Strickland, but the total is still \$65 million lower than the current two-year budget, Walter said.

Preliminary data released yesterday show that through April, total state tax receipts for the fiscal year that ends June 30 are \$541.3 million, or 3.7 percent, off estimates that were revised just before Christmas. Administration officials announced this week that the shortfall for the entire fiscal year is expected to be at least \$600 million and perhaps more than \$900 million.

Yesterday, Strickland defended his handling of the budget and his budget team in the face of blistering Republican criticism, saying his staffers are doing the best they can in an unpredictable economy with no alternatives being offered.

House Speaker Armond Budish, D-Beachwood, also defended his decision to use rosier revenue estimates that helped him add more than \$600 million in spending to

Strickland's budget. He noted that one critic, Sen. John A. Carey Jr., R-Wellston, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said he plans to use the same higher revenue estimates.

"I think it's unfair to say we acted any way but fiscally responsible," he said. "We did not have the tax results, nor could we have had the tax results, giving the timing."

In other budget news:

◦ The Ohio Chamber of Commerce called on lawmakers yesterday to pass a one-year budget, instead of the traditional two-year plan, because "we simply believe today's unprecedented economic climate prevents anyone from accurately projecting state revenue."

◦ While the Senate is slicing at least \$1 billion from the budget, charter schools might be in line for at least \$300 million in additional funding.

"The most inhumane thing done in our state would be to cause charter schools to have to close their doors," Senate President Bill M. Harris, R-Ashland, said of the House cuts. "What happens to those young people? We're not going to do that."

Asked where the money comes from, Harris said, "I don't know at this point. But we're looking and we'll find it."

◦ Harris also made it clear that he prefers the current school-funding system over the plan developed by Strickland and House Democrats. Republicans appear ready to scrap the governor's "evidence-based" plan, which Harris called "flawed."

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