

Could state cuts lead to suicides?

Mental health advocates rally to prevent further reductions in service.

By William Hershey
Staff Writer

COLUMBUS — In what could be a preview of coming state budget protests, advocates for Ohioans with mental illness and addiction problems rallied outside the Statehouse a day after Gov. Ted Strickland's administration revealed a gaping budget hole.

More cuts in the current budget and the proposed new two-year budget now under consideration would mean "more suicides" and more people in jail instead of treatment, Robert Mullins, public affairs director for the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board for Montgomery County, said after the rally on Wednesday, May 6.

Budget Director Paris Sabet and Tax Commissioner Richard Levin on Tuesday revealed the state faces a shortfall ranging from \$600 million to more than \$900 million for the fiscal year that ends June 30. It's likely the state will have to use part of its \$942 million "rainy day" fund to fill the gap.

Strickland had planned to use the "rainy day" fund for the new two-year state bud-

get that takes effect July 1.

Gayle Channing Tenenbaum, co-chairwoman of the Coalition to Protect Ohio's Future, said without new taxes — which Strickland and legislators have ruled out — the budget hole and plans to use the "rainy day" fund mean the budget will have a gap of at least \$1 billion for the next two years. Her coalition includes health, human services and education groups.

The crisis presents some unpleasant choices, Tenenbaum said. In making cuts, lawmakers and Strickland will have to choose between spending for education or "protecting the most vulnerable: our abused and neglected children, our elderly who are abused, our people with mental illness."

The announcement from Sabet and Levin came less than a week after the Democratic-controlled House passed its version of the \$54 billion two-year budget under consideration by the Republican-controlled Senate.

In a meeting with reporters, Strickland denied he held back revenue estimates so Republicans in the Senate would have to make the tough decisions.

Republicans today will have a chance to question Sabet before the Finance Committee.

Staff Writer Laura A. Bischoff contributed to this report.