

Budget ax casts a shadow on social service agencies

Non-profit groups that help the poor worry they'll lose wads of state cash

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Mamie Smith saw it as one-stop shopping for the medical tests she has been putting off because she lacks health insurance.

For a nominal fee, the Calumet Park senior had her blood pressure and cholesterol checked and found out, to her relief, she did not have diabetes. She even had her spine examined by a doctor who gave her some helpful advice.

"They told me my alignment was off because I was holding my hands away from my body," Smith said during the recent Community and Economic Development Association of Cook County's Health Fair at the Calumet Township Senior Building.

Hundreds of other low- to moderate-income residents took advantage of CEDA's first-ever health fair in the south suburbs, which offered a host of free and low-cost medical, dental and psychological services from scores of private health-care agencies who donated time and equipment for the fair.

But the looming threat that the state could cut up to 50 percent of its social services spending -- funding that the nonprofit groups depend on in large part -- if lawmakers do not pass an income tax increase dampened the fair's festive atmosphere.

Megan Moya, a dental assistant helping to administer \$20 dental exams in a bus operated by Aunt Martha's, one of the area's largest social service agencies, said the threatened state budget cuts could mean vast reductions in the agency's behavioral health programs.

The cuts would almost surely rule out participation in events such as CEDA's health fair as resources are shifted to retain the organizations' core programs, Moya said.

"For the bus to come out alone, it's a cost. Just for the bus," she said. "It's all costly, and when we get budget cuts the community is going to feel it."

Floretta Strong-Pulley, a minority veterans coordinator for the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center on Chicago's South Side, said the center is in beat-the-clock mode providing medical services for veterans as legislators remain deadlocked over the tax increase and a budget still billions of dollars short.

"We don't know what the state's going to do so we're encouraging people to sign up quickly," she said.

State Rep. William Davis (D- Hazel Crest) said many fair attendees are among the 45 million uninsured and underinsured that President Barack Obama talks about when he explains his health-care reform plan.

Davis said he would support whatever size income tax increase may be needed to retain full funding for social service programs, and legislators could find more "efficiencies" in the state budget but will not be able to make enough cuts to plug the budget hole.

Jason Maymon, a spokesman for CEDA, said the organization is planning to hold another fair next year and hopes to make it an annual event for uninsured and underinsured residents to receive basic medical and dental services they otherwise could not afford.

Still, it remains to be seen whether he can get the same volunteer participation from nonprofit agencies if they are forced to cut deep into their budgets.

"Just as always we will find ways to bring services to the public," Maymon said.

He added that volunteer, community-based health care is more important than ever as more people lose their jobs and insurance.

Smith said the health fair put her mind at ease and offered information that will help her better maintain her health on her own -- not to mention the medical tests and consultations that would have cost her hundreds of dollars.

"I found out I was doing OK," she said.

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