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Anniston library hosts forum on pending cuts to Alabama Medicaid

By Patrick McCreless, Star Staff Writer, pmccreless@annistonstar.com May 27, 2016



Photo by Stephen Gross / The Anniston Star

Stan Johnson of Alabama Arise speaks to a group gathered at the Anniston Public Library about Medicaid cuts.

Cliff Andrews spent 40 years helping mentally disabled patients across the state. Before retiring from the Learning Tree in Anniston, a school for learning-disabled children, he'd seen mental health patients' need for prescription drugs.

He doesn't want to see what would happen if any of that drug coverage disappeared.

"Virtually every individual who has developmental disabilities in Alabama get their medicine through Medicaid," Andrews said. "How are they going to pay for their meds when many of them only have Social Security or live in a group home?"

Andrews of Piedmont was one of about 10 Calhoun County residents who attended a public forum in Anniston Friday on the expected effect of the state's pending cuts to the Medicaid program. The forum was held to inform and ask attendees to tell others about the cuts and encourage them to demand the state government fully fund Medicaid.

Alabama Arise, an advocacy group for the poor, hosted the event at the Public Library of Anniston and Calhoun County.

"We need for you to educate others and to spread the word," said Stan Johnson, Arise organizer.

About 1 million Alabamians rely on Medicaid, a joint state-and-federal program that provides health care coverage to the state's poorest, mainly children and the disabled. The Alabama Legislature in April approved a budget that was short \$85 million that Medicaid officials say will be needed to keep their program's services operating at current levels.

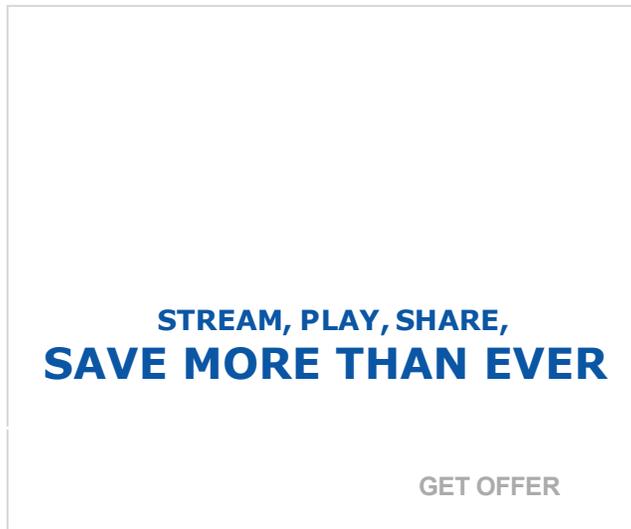
Among the cuts Medicaid officials are considering: eliminating adult prescription drug coverage to save around \$50 million. Other services on the potential chopping block are coverage for outpatient dialysis and prosthetics. Primary care physicians' payment cuts are also a possibility.

"Doctors are already complaining, but they're going to be cut even more," Johnson said.

The cuts are set to start Oct. 1, but could be halted by the Legislature in a special session this year. To date, Gov. Robert Bentley has shown little interest in reconvening lawmakers in a special session.

Stan Easton of Jacksonville said after the event that he isn't on Medicaid but knows people who are and is very concerned about the cuts.

"Obviously, people around here aren't going to get care," Easton said.



Easton added that less Medicaid spending means less money for the overall economy.

"It makes sense for us to pay doctors and nurses who then all spend that money in local stores," Easton said.

Health care experts have said much of the medical industry in Alabama relies on Medicaid dollars to survive and without them, some clinics and hospitals won't survive. And that means less access to care for everyone, not just Medicaid patients, they say.

"In Alabama, we're all on Medicaid," Johnson said. "The last MRI you took was probably paid for with Medicaid, you just didn't know it."

Jim Williams of Anniston said one of his main concerns about Medicaid cuts is reduced access to care for all Alabamians, particularly those who live in rural areas. Williams, Alabama legislative officer for the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association, said if more rural hospitals and clinics close because of reduced funding, lives could be lost by people needing to travel longer distances than before for care.

“It these cuts get made, it doesn’t matter how much insurance you’ve got, you’re in trouble,”
Williams said.

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