

Advocates for disabled rally against budget cuts

Brian Lyman, Montgomery Advertiser  1:57 p.m. CDT May 13, 2015



(Photo: Brian Lyman/Advertiser)

To explain the need, Karen Hallmark invokes her daughter's tears.

Rachel is 34 years old; Hallmark says cognitively, she functions on the level between a 4-year-old and a 7-year-old. As a school-aged student, she had access to services, but had to wait seven years before she could get into an adult program.

"Long story short, she lost ground," Hallmark said, adding that her communication skills dropped as her boredom and bad behavior increased.

As many as 24,000 people could lose ground, if the Legislature approves proposed Department of Mental Health budget cuts. That's why Hallmark and about 200 people held a rally at the Capitol on Wednesday to urge legislators not to reduce funding for the state's mental health and disability programs.

When Rachel finally got into Arc of Madison County, Rachel once again began forming relationships with people outside her family, Hallmark said. When one of her housemates died, she "burst spontaneously into tears" on two occasions — all the more notable, said Hallmark, because her daughter has shed tears perhaps 10 times in the past 24 years.

"Now that may sound like 'Momma, what's wrong with you that you would be pleased about that,'" Hallmark said on the steps of the Alabama State House Tuesday morning. "But that showed me she was able to connect on a deep caring level with another human being that is not a family member. And momma and daddy are not going to be around forever."

But services like those that helped Rachel could be at risk. The programs, like many funded through the state's General Fund budget, face significant budget cuts if legislators cannot find revenue to address a shortfall of between \$204 and \$234 million.

A draft budget circulated by the Legislature's budget chairs in late March — meant to illustrate the scale of cuts that could take place without new revenues — estimated a cut of about \$32.5 million in General Fund money, which with the losses of matching federal dollars could create a cut as high as \$99 million.

[A memo from Gov. Robert Bentley in April \(/story/news/local/alabama/2015/04/20/alabama-governor-robert-bentley-state-parks-to-close-services-cut-without-revenue/26081565/\)](/story/news/local/alabama/2015/04/20/alabama-governor-robert-bentley-state-parks-to-close-services-cut-without-revenue/26081565/) warned that the cuts could take services away from up to 24,000 mentally ill or intellectually disabled people. That could mean everything from family members having to leave jobs so they can provide full-time care to their loved ones to mentally ill people being released from facilities (and possibly ending up in jail) to layoffs of those who work with the mentally ill and disabled.

The Arc of Alabama, which coordinates services for intellectually disabled people, has been holding rallies around the state against the possible budget cuts. Terry Pezent, the executive director of the organization, said the cuts would effectively undermine years of work toward moving their clients into environments where they have some freedom and ability to make their own decisions.

[House leaders pull back \\$149M tax package before vote \(/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2015/05/12/house-leaders-pull-back-tax-package-vote/27195865/\)](/story/news/politics/southunionstreet/2015/05/12/house-leaders-pull-back-tax-package-vote/27195865/)

"There would be more restrictions," she said before Tuesday's rally. "The transportation — you take people grocery shopping, to doctors' appointments, to mental health appointments ... People would be more restricted and potentially homeless. Most of the people we serve have no family support. They (are) very limited in capacity to advocate for themselves."

Arc already has a waiting list of 3,200 people seeking services, she said. Henry Parker, executive director of the Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority, said in the local area, the cuts would amount to just over \$1 million, which could force them to lay off up to 39 employees and get rid of some residential beds.

"If I lose some of them, they will have to go on the street," Parker said. "The last thing we want is the mentally ill on the street. That will flood county jails, city jails and the ERs."

For Hallmark, the budget cuts made her afraid that when she died, the services that her daughter depends on may not be there.

"I know (legislators') jobs are hard," she said. "But I'm the mom, and it's my job to take care of my daughter. And I'm not going to be here forever."



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