

# State's mental health funding causing concern for local providers

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, April 14, 2015 12:15 am

For 150 people receiving services through Arc of the Shoals, threats of cuts to the state's mental health budget mean the programs their families depend on could come to an end.

The Arc, with its Hope Haven training facility and oversight of residential services for the intellectually disabled, is among the state's facilities that could be drastically impacted by budget cuts this year.

"The (state) department has told us to prepare for cuts from 11 percent to 21 percent," Arc of the Shoals Director Donna Akins said. "Frankly, we will be shut down if cuts in funding are this drastic."

Last week, Alabama's commissioner of Mental Health, James Reddoch, addressed the Legislature, outlining the impact of proposed cuts on the state's mental health system.

"If this budget or anything close to it passes, it will dismantle Alabama's community-based systems of care for people with mental illness and intellectual disabilities," Reddoch said during the hearings.

Statewide, more than 3,000 families are awaiting services, some for more than 10 years. Locally, the Arc, which serves 150 clients, has a waiting list of 150 as well, according to Akins.

Murray Townsend, a member of both the local and state Arc boards of directors, said although last week's meetings brought discouraging news, "it became clearer than ever that state government needs to establish a growth revenue stream so we don't have to fight this battle every year."

He said the local Arc's budget of \$3.5 million is at break-even level and "even with very low management overhead, we still struggle to make it."

Townsend said reorganization of programs, mandatory employee multi-tasking and positions being cut, are a few of the steps the nonprofit organization has taken in recent years to stay afloat.

"The state's service providers were asked to project what would happen with 11 percent, 19 percent and 21 percent budget cuts," Townsend said. "Most everyone would have to close with even an 11 percent cut."

State Rep. Lynn Greer, R-Rogersville, said with the shutdown of all but three mental health institutions and the establishment of the more economical community homes, the savings should be recognized now. But that's not the case.

"Instead, mental health hasn't had a raise, and the budget scenario looks very grim," Greer said. "No one wants new taxes, but we can't sacrifice our mental health system and the services we must provide. It's a dilemma."

State Sen. Tim Melson, R-Florence, said without raising taxes, there most likely will be cuts in services.

“Mental health is not the area to cut,” he said. “I’ll go down fighting.”

One of the proposed cuts, according to Townsend, is \$13 million in state funds which, with the federal match taken into account, would amount to \$33 million.

The mental health funding rates have increased by 4 percent in the past 15 years, while in the same time period the rate of inflation has been 41 percent, Townsend said.

“It’s not that we don’t recognize the dilemma the state is in financially,” Townsend said. “But there’s a responsibility the state has to provide for this vulnerable population.”

Florence resident Wanda Ross’ son, Dustin, has been in the Arc program for nearly seven years, since he left high school at the age of 21.

Ross said her son’s autism demands he have routine in his day-to-day life. Without the routine provided by the 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. program, he regresses, she said.

“We own a small business and I have to work, so I don’t know what we’d do if we didn’t have this program,” Ross said. “We truly depend on it.”

Ross said sitters aren’t an option for her son, and if he didn’t have a program to attend during the day, she would have to quit working.

That would be a reality for many families with loved ones being served at the Arc, according to Akins. She said if the Hope Haven program closes, many clients’ parents will be forced to give up jobs.