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1/30/12

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Mental health service providers facing sharp cuts

By Lisa Singleton-Rickman

Mental health service providers were warned last week to prepare for a 25 percent cut to their budgets.

The news wasn't unexpected. Alabama's mental health commissioner, Zella Baugh, said as much in a management steering committee meeting Wednesday.

Murray Townsend, state president of The Arc of Alabama, which oversees the Hope Haven Training Center for individuals with intellectual disabilities, said the cuts would begin in October for the fiscal year 2013 budget. Add to that the possibility of proration at 10 percent on this year's budget, and the picture is bleak, Townsend said.

"The service providers are already operating on 70 cents on the dollar now, and to be told more cuts are likely coming, I don't know what we'll do," said Townsend, who also is president of the local Arc organization.

For Arc of the Shoals, the 25 percent cut would mean \$750,000 of an already meager \$3 million budget.

Other local providers, such as Riverbend Center for Mental Health and Scope 310, also would be affected.

John Ziegler, public information officer for the Department of Mental Health, said his department is expected to submit a budget analysis to the Legislative Budget Office as if there was a 25 percent cut. It's not easy to do, he said.

"We've taken cuts the last few years and have been able to reduce our costs, but 25 percent is a lot no matter how you look at it," he said. "We say we've cut to the bone but now we're down to the marrow."

Ziegler said the danger of being forced to make such significant cuts is undoing the work that's been done statewide to adequately serve the population in need of mental health assistance.

"We're looking at a train wreck of expanded costs if we have to reduce our programs that have been so carefully constructed over the years," he said.

Townsend said he's expecting more definitive numbers after a meeting this week about the state's mental health budget.

"We just have to wait and hope there's a way not to make such deep cuts," he said. "I don't see how the governor and Legislature can say they're not going to raise taxes when there's a \$400 million shortfall in the general fund. I understand the mess we're in as a state, but I also know that the waiting list of 2,900 Alabamians in need of mental health services is growing.

"This is our most fragile population, and they can't get the help they need with these kinds of cuts. It just can't happen."

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