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Mental health agencies face cuts, officials say

Chris Rhatigan , Register Staff

Two area mental health and addiction agencies warned Thursday that if Gov. M. Jodi Rell's budget is approved, they will have to cut staff and services.

"We must not balance the budget on the backs of those that need it most," said Barry Kasdan, director of Bridges, A Community Support System in Milford.

Kasdan and Harbor Health Services President Roberta Cook said the proposed budget would leave funding for their organizations level. Under a General Assembly proposal, funding would increase 3 percent this year and stay level the following year.

If Rell's budget is passed, Cook said Harbor Health, a Branford-based organization, will lose four positions. Kasdan said Bridges will not be able to fill 10 vacant positions. The organizations requested a 7 percent increase for fiscal 2007-2008 and 5 percent for the following year.

Increases in funding for nonprofit community agencies has remained under 2 percent a year, according to Kasdan, not enough to keep up with rising costs and inflation.

The two spoke Thursday morning at a press conference at Bridges in Milford.

"Each year, we're faced with the daunting task of doing more with less," Cook said. "Cutting funding does not eliminate the need for services." Cook noted that if those seeking help from these agencies, which deal with mental illness and addiction patients, end up going to the emergency room, it will cost taxpayers more in the end.

Kasdan said Bridges has 170 people on a waiting list for its services. He expects that number to rise to about 200 in the next year if the budget is passed as is.

A spokesman for Rell could not be reached for comment.

State House Speaker James A. Amann, D-Milford, said the legislature's proposed budget is \$39 million more than Rell's for agencies such as Bridges and Harbor. He added that he encourages the agencies to "fight for their dollars, but at this stage of the game it's hard to make a commitment to give more."

State Sen. Toni N. Harp, D-New Haven, co-chairwoman of the Appropriations Committee, said the legislators will fight for more money, but it will be difficult because of the spending cap.

"We'll take their concerns into consideration during negotiations with the governor," she said. Harp said that many state agencies are not getting increases. "(The agencies) have gotten rate increases. There are other aspects of our budget that haven't gotten a rate increase in 20 years," she said.

Milford Mayor James L. Richetelli Jr. said Bridges has helped the city immensely and needs to be properly funded.

"We're talking about dollars we need to keep this program going, but what we're really talking about is people," he said. "We need to make sure that our legislators and the governor hear that the community providers are not here for any other reason but to help people."

Lori Hanna, president of the Open Door Social Club, a service supported by Bridges, was one of several people who shared their story about conquering mental illness with help from the agencies. Hanna said before she went to Bridges, she spent four or five years in and out of hospitals.

"Through the many activities offered, I gained new skills and increased my self-esteem and confidence," she said. "I am actively working at recovery, and I am a representative of hundreds who deserve a chance to grow and recover."

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