

Rell budget proposal suffocates nonprofit providers

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As the legislature and Gov. M. Jodi Rell continue to debate the merits of her budget proposal, one area that has received little attention is the effects this budget plan will have on community providers.

Connecticut state government relies on the nonprofit community provider network to deliver good quality social services and health care programs that serve nearly 500,000 residents. These men, women and children have a variety of special needs, such as developmental disabilities, mental illness and substance dependency.

I am a proud member of the network, serving as president and CEO of Bridges — A Community Support System Inc. in Milford. At Bridges, celebrating its 50th anniversary, we provide a broad variety of services, including crisis intervention, treatment, outreach and community-based support programs that serve adults and children.

Community programs, like those at Bridges, can eliminate or minimize time spent in hospital emergency rooms and in institutional care. We provide services to 22 towns and over 5,000 individuals annually.

Last year, Bridges and other state-funded providers received a budget increase of 1.5 percent. This increase failed to keep up with the cost of living and major increases in utility and insurance costs. Bridges was forced to leave vacant 10 positions in order to balance its budget and honor its contract with the staff. Services have suffered as we struggle to meet increased requests for help from area residents.

Over the last 20 years, the cost of living increases in our state grants have averaged a little more than 1 percent. It is for this reason that nonprofit community providers had requested a substantial but reasonable budget increase of 7 percent and 5 percent over the next two years.

Unfortunately, the governor's proposal has virtually no COLA increase for the vast majority of state-supported community providers. This will exacerbate the chronic underfunding of community providers and escalate it to a catastrophic level.

Last year we struggled to maintain a system of care that began to see the erosion of our basic mental health and substance abuse programs.

With the proposed budget, it is almost too hard and painful to even imagine the damage that will be caused to essential community-based services. Our initial projections

would put Bridges at a \$500,000 deficit for next year and almost \$1 million in the second year of the proposed budget.

Community providers and the clients they serve depend on state funding to ensure that people continue to receive high quality mental health services in a consistent manner. This is simply not possible without the proper funding to attract, train and retain a staff so vital to ensuring the continuity of care our clients need and deserve.

Should this budget remain unchanged or just increased a token amount, the state will be on the road to abandoning its investment and commitment to thousands of our most vulnerable citizens.

At a recent meeting of our board's executive committee, I witnessed such intense emotion and outrage that I was moved to write this article. Community volunteers who have given their time, money and commitment to the mission of our agency felt abandoned. They represent local and regional businesses, educational systems, major corporations and retired business people who had bought into the concept of the public-private partnership they felt we had. Now they spoke of having to give up contracts and grants that could no longer be sustained under this pending fiscal crisis.

It is unfortunate and poor public policy to craft a budget that pits human services needs against other sectors, such as health care and education. Yet, that is what has been created. We must not balance a budget on the backs of those who need our help the most. Yet, that is exactly what is being done.

When the state fails to provide adequate community behavioral health care, children do poorly in school, adults can't be effective parents and lose days at work, emergency rooms fill to capacity and, before you have a chance to catch your breath, you are forced to pay for increased hospital beds, prison cells, homeless shelters and other costly emergency services. This comes at a much higher cost than adequately funding our community services, the safety net in each of our communities.

How much longer must we ignore the basic fiscal reality of our situation? Community-based nonprofits funded by the state are part of a budget solution. We are not the problem.