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Oregon lawmakers struggle to avert cuts to programs serving people with developmental disabilities

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Michelle Cole, The Oregonian
By



BENJAMIN BRINK/The Oregonian

Judy Borges participates in a music therapy group Friday at the Bethesda Lutheran Communities center in Northwest Portland.

The dozen men and women in this circle wouldn't even make eye contact a year ago. But on Friday, some sang, others clapped or shook tambourines. Many smiled.

It's all part of the music therapy class offered at **Bethesda Lutheran Communities** Center, a nonprofit that serves people with developmental disabilities. Now this class and similar programs across Oregon that receive state money are targeted for elimination because of budget cuts.

That could mean Judy Borges, who plays a mean maraca, might spend her days at home. It could also bring wrenching choices for Eric Davis, who has a 21-year-old son with autism so severe that he cannot be left alone.

The son, also named Eric, spends from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday at the Lutheran center in Northwest Portland, where he has his own desk and activities, such as matching patterns or colors.

His father hopes that his son may someday be able to have a job, but he's content that Eric has a place to go and a structured routine.

There's no way, Davis says, that either he or his wife could afford to stop working to stay home with their son.

"We want him with us," he says. But without access to programs like this, Davis worries that his son and others like him would be forced into a group home. The irony, he adds, is that could end up costing

taxpayers far more.

Roy Soards, Northwest regional director at Bethesda, confirms that it costs about \$1,000 a month to have young Eric Davis at the center versus about \$10,000 a month if he were to spend his days and nights at a group home.

State leaders acknowledge this. But they are struggling to write a budget that meets federal mandates and preserves programs serving the most vulnerable Oregonians. Republicans and Democrats say there will be cuts affecting people with developmental disabilities and their families. There's no way around it. State budgets cannot run a deficit.

"This is a heart-wrenching process to go through," **Rep. Tim Freeman**, a Republican from Roseburg and co-chair of the Ways & Means Human Services subcommittee, said Friday.

In his budget released earlier this year, Democratic **Gov. John Kitzhaber** proposes an \$88 million increase in state spending for disability programs. That increase doesn't make up for the loss of one-time, federal stimulus money that protected programs during the economic downturn. Overall, under the governor's spending plan, the total amount of state and federal support for state disability programs would drop by \$81.7 million for 2011-13.

Mary Lee Fay, administrator for the state **Office of Developmental Disability Services**, says "nothing was spared" when her agency prepared its \$1.2 billion spending plan for the next two fiscal years.

Program providers got rate cuts. Case managers got more people to monitor. And then, Fay says, "we had to go deeper."

The budget eliminates \$8 million for "alternatives to work" programs serving 1,600 to 2,000 people, including the program offered through Bethesda Lutheran. It would also eliminate \$3.7 million distributed for family support services.

That money, earmarked only for families caring for children with disabilities at home, is most frequently used to pay for respite care.

"Sometimes looking forward to one weekend a year away can save a marriage, save a family and make all the difference in the world," says Patrice Botsford, director for developmental disabilities programs for Multnomah County.

Jeanne Farr, senior vice president for **Albertina Kerr Centers**, says the 4 percent rate reduction to providers in the current budget proposals comes on top of a 6 percent state cut last year.

"It's unquestionably the bleakest outlook and the most frightening future I've ever seen in my life in the

field," she says. "I've never before had to reduce staffing, cut quality assurance. I'm genuinely afraid that we're going to be going backwards and putting people that we serve in crisis."

At the same time that lawmakers are scrambling to pay for disability programs, the number of Oregonians seeking services is on the rise.

"We net 93 new people every month," says Fay, state disability administrator.

State officials expect to see more than 20,000 Oregonians receiving services from state disability programs this year. That's up from about 17,000 in 2009.

"Our big growth is in kids," Fay says. That includes children with autism and children suffering the effects of a drug- or alcohol-addicted mother.

This week, legislative leaders and the governor met in a private summit and agreed to direct whatever dollars they can to safety-net programs for the poor and vulnerable and for prisons and public safety. On Thursday, state budget writers learned they might have \$129 million more than they expected for 2011-13.

But **Sen. Alan Bates**, a Democrat from Ashland and Senate co-chair of the Ways and Means Human Services subcommittee, says the good revenue news only goes so far.

There's a good chance, he says, that the alternative-to-work day programs can be preserved -- at least partially.

"I think the cuts are going to be terrible," Bates says. "But we want to maintain the remnants of these programs so, hopefully, when the economy turns around we can rebuild them."

--**Michelle Cole**

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