Illinois No. 1 state for mental health budget cuts
by LACY SCHLEY and VERONICA J. SMITH
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Illinois mental health patients and professionals face serious trouble, due to recent proposals by both Gov. Patrick Quinn and Mayor Rahm Emanuel to cut funding for mental health care.

Protestors and mental health organization officials gathered in the Thompson Center plaza for a rally on Wednesday to speak out against recent mental health budget cuts and the proposed closing of several mental health facilities in Chicago and statewide.

The number of clinics in Chicago would drop from 12 to six, officials stated. State mental health institutions in Rockford and Tinley Park are predicted to close if the cuts go through.

By the end of last year, Illinois came in at No. 1 for mental health budget cuts, totaling more than 31 percent, said Hugh Brady, president of the Illinois board of National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

He added that these cuts, in combination with the additional 40 percent in cuts proposed by Quinn, would mean Illinois will have cut over 71 percent of its mental health budget in the past five years.

“That is outrageous and it’s unacceptable,” Brady said.

The cuts threaten psychiatric care, medications and other services needed to manage mental health symptoms, advocates maintain. The mental health budget isn’t fully funded to begin with, so any decrease is devastating,” said Carol Gall, executive director of Mental Health America of Illinois.

According to a NAMI report released in March 2011, Illinois ranks No. 4 on the list for cutting general mental health funds between 2009-2011, cutting approximately $113.7 million.

The same report also lists Illinois in the top 10 states for percentage cuts to mental health budgets. Between 2009-2011, Illinois downsized their budget by 15 percent.

Dr. Joseph E. Troiani, associate professor of clinical psychology at Chicago’s Adler School of Professional Psychology and a retired U.S. Navy Commander, said these budget cuts are also hurting veterans.

“Working in community health, I know that our mental health system sees a lot of veterans, because of the unavailability of veteran services,” Troiani said. “Veterans who have no resources...will often come to the community mental health system. When we reduce services, we’re also hurting veterans.”

Troiani said these budget cuts are “creating a defunct mental health system” since it then falls to the jails to provide services that the mental health clinics once provided.

“It’s appalling, it’s embarrassing, that the largest psychiatric facility in the United States is Cook County Jail,” Troiani said over the booing of the crowd.

Suzanne Andriukaitis, executive director of NAMI of Greater Chicago, said having the jails pick up the slack of the shut-down mental health clinics is actually a more expensive option.

“Sometimes, if they don’t receive services, they do something that gets them in jail, which costs more money” Andriukaitis said.

However, according to the City of Chicago’s 2012 Mental Health Services overview posted on the city’s official website, consolidating centers in the city will allow for increased psychiatric services and more efficient operation of the clinics.

Priscilla Owens, a 45-year-old patron of Trilogy Behavioral Healthcare in Chicago, said the closures, that are occurring because of the budget cuts, will make it harder on people who depend on these clinics if they have to travel farther to a new one.

“Are a lot of people who are sick and still need help,” Owens said. “I don’t think they’ll take the initiative to get help for their illness.”

State Representative William Davis (D-Hazel Crest) said there is still no clear-cut plan on what kinds of services will be provided to community members utilizing the clinics.
will be shutting down.

As far as trying to strike a compromise between mental health advocates and legislators, Davis said the outlook is grim.

“There probably isn’t a way to meet in the middle,” Davis said. “There needs to be another conversation to look at putting more revenue into the budget, or trying to prevent cuts as deep as the ones being proposed. Unfortunately nobody’s willing to have that conversation.”

Officials contacted in the Illinois Department of Human Services and the Chicago Department of Public Health did not return phone calls made to their offices.

Print story by Lacy Schley