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Jan. 6, 2010

MENTAL HEALTH BUDGET CUTS COULD HAVE SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON OKLAHOMA COMMUNITIES

Budget cuts of \$16 million to the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services since July, and the possibility of even deeper cuts for the remainder of the fiscal year, are expected to have significant repercussions for communities across Oklahoma – including those in areas outside of the Oklahoma City and Tulsa metropolitan areas, where treatment facilities are few and far between.

To date, the department has been forced to trim \$16 million from an already “bare bones” budget, with more cuts possible if mental health and substance abuse treatment aren’t considered “essential services” and protected when legislators meet again to discuss the state’s budget crisis.

ODMHSAS Commissioner and Oklahoma Secretary of Health Terri White warned that current and future cuts will result in additional state funds being needed to clean up the mess created when mental and addictive disorders are left untreated and under-addressed – especially in the areas of law enforcement and health care.

“The consequences to the state are not limited simply to the operations of this agency,” said White. “The impact will be felt in other areas, with greatly increased costs to individual communities that now will be responsible for filling the void created in our system. Someone must be able to help the individuals who will no longer be served by the department, or they will remain in the community – without services – to become more ill, and destructive to themselves and others.”

With the last round of budget cuts, the agency began reducing provider contracts and restructuring state operated adult substance abuse and children's mental health services. The changes made to date were designed to minimize the impact on individual communities, but unless funding for these services is protected as additional cuts are ordered, the impact may be devastating.

"We are talking about the loss of jobs and services at community mental health and substance abuse facilities throughout the state," White said.

"Without a doubt, this will result in people in crisis ending up at local hospitals without the resources to pay for care, increased crime and law enforcement being taken off the streets to handle incidents related to untreated illnesses, suicide and, potentially, other negative consequences and tragedies that impact entire communities.

"Costs will be further shifted to the community if we are forced to cut services any more," she added. "This has already proved true in other parts of the country where decreased community services have caused individuals with mental illnesses to flood already-busy emergency rooms, overwhelming unprepared doctors and nurses, and resulting in expensive medical care that is usually uncompensated. Police are being taken off the streets for hours and, in some cases, days, to guard patients, fill out paperwork for emergency detentions, or transport people in crisis to facilities hundreds of miles away."

White said the agency's goal is to maintain as many services as possible, with the least impact on local communities, but as budget cuts continue, this will become even more difficult to do.

“The consequences of additional cuts would be far reaching,” said White. “We are very much aware of the impact of such decisions related to individuals, families, local economies and public safety.”

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