

Medicaid changes and budget cuts cause for concern

01:00 AM EDT on Wednesday, March 26, 2008

By Donita Naylor

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Anthony J. Vellucci, executive director of the Frank Olean Center in Westerly, didn't sound scared, but his news release did.

"Yes, the Governor did suspend cuts to providers serving people with developmental disabilities," Vellucci's e-mail said, cautioning that that was just for 2008.

Vellucci predicts dire times for the next fiscal year, which begins July 1.

"Providers now face two major hurdles," he says. "The first is an expected double-digit cut to its services due to an ever-increasing state deficit, and the second is Medicaid reform."

Calling the anticipated cuts devastating, he urged people "to call, e-mail or write their local legislators, and tell them that this is an outrage, that this is setting services back decades."

Vellucci, 56, has worked in his field for 34 years, part of that time at the former Ladd Center, in Exeter. "The irony of all this," he said, "is that we've partnered with the state to create this system in Rhode Island, to open up provider diversity, so people could choose different providers and obtain different levels of services.

"Now the lines have been drawn. We have to solve the budget deficit and simultaneously be exposed to this new Medicaid reform. It could have a devastating effect on these people and their families."

People with disabilities who are able to get jobs, live in apartments or in a group or private home and become integrated in the community now risk losing support staff who teach them skills for independence, help with basic self-care and provide respite to family caregivers.

"We don't want the institutions reopened," Vellucci said. "We want people to have choices and participate in meaningful activities."

He said that providers have streamlined purchasing, insurance and administrative costs, and that deeper cuts would result in fewer choices, a narrower range of services and people with disabilities being denied services or sitting on waiting lists.

He wants to tell taxpayers, voters and families of people with disabilities that “the time to act is now. It’s not too early and it’s not too late.”

“Attend forums,” he said. “Follow the stories in the press. A ‘Lack of Action’ could be the worst decision of all.”

Vallucci’s clients are just one of the populations affected by state budget cuts.

Workshops are being held around the state to teach voters and people who work with the poor, elderly, disabled and children and families about the budget process and how the proposed cuts might affect them.

The Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College’s School of Social Work is organizing the forums, which are cosponsored by One Rhode Island and the Children’s Policy Coalition.

A South County workshop will begin at 7 tonight in Christ the King parish hall, 180 Old North Rd., Kingston. A PowerPoint presentation will be followed by a question period.

A Westerly workshop is in the planning stages.

The forums are designed to show taxpayers as well as staff members, clients, agency directors and members of boards how to influence the state budget.

Some of cuts are headed for: RIte Care/RIte Share health insurance, the Family Independence Program, Head Start and programs for affordable housing, child welfare and food assistance.

Meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse will visit the Westerly Senior Center today to encourage everyone to file tax returns this year so they can get some of the economic stimulus money passed by Congress and signed by President Bush last month.

Seniors living on Social Security benefits and disabled veterans or their survivors are eligible for tax-free rebates starting at \$300. They are eligible only if they file a tax return, even if they usually don’t file.

Representatives from the IRS and the AARP will be available to answer questions in the session at 39 State St., Westerly. It starts at 11:30 a.m.

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