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## **Cuts to Mental Health and Substance Abuse Funding Will Financially Burden and Endanger Florida's Communities**

**by Bob Sharpe**

Facing a projected \$3.6 billion budget deficit, the State of Florida is again "stuck between a rock and a hard place." An economic downturn plagued by high unemployment, a low tax base, revenue shortages and a large population with substantial needs for public services has forced Legislators to search for means to cut expenditures and "fill the gap." Rather than explore the creation of new revenue sources, the Legislature may again turn to funding the budget shortfall with cuts to vital community mental health services. This approach to budgeting has caused Florida to struggle with meeting the basic treatment needs of some of our most vulnerable citizens and will result in financial burden to Florida's communities and endanger public safety.

Serious questions are being raised in the Florida Senate about whether or not the state can simply rely on Medicaid for its mental health and substance abuse care and eliminate all or most of the critical mental health and substance abuse services administered by the Department of Children and Families (DCF). However, Medicaid does not cover many severely and persistently mentally ill individuals, because they either do not meet the overly restrictive criteria for federal disability, or they have incomes just slightly above the poverty income threshold that qualifies a person for Medicaid. Many mental health crisis, residential and support services are also not covered by Medicaid and substance abuse coverage is virtually non-existent.

Florida currently ranks 49<sup>th</sup> among the states in mental health funding and 35<sup>th</sup> in substance abuse funding. What little community-based funding currently available is devoted to providing critical services to severely mentally ill individuals who are, or could become, a danger to themselves or others, leaving thousands of citizens with mild or moderate illnesses without treatment due to a lack of funding. Without DCF funding, our approach to public safety would be irreparably damaged. Crisis stabilization units for citizens at risk of suicide, residential treatment programs for citizens requiring long-term care and vital programs that pay for essential medications to stabilize severe mental illnesses will all be terminated.

With nowhere for the severely mentally ill to turn for help, the state will experience an increase in expensive emergency hospital admissions, forensic commitments, jail admissions, prison incarcerations and homeless individuals who will pose a danger to themselves and their communities. More state spending will be needed to support the growing mentally ill prison and hospital population – placing further strain on two systems already burdened by unsustainable growth and in need of immediate reform to combat ballooning expenses. The network of crisis services law enforcement and the courts have relied on would be lost, and Florida would lose all federal mental health and substance abuse block grant funds for failing to maintain even a semblance of a state treatment system.

Nearly half of DCF's mental health budget is spent on forensic, civil and sexual predator placements in state hospitals or contracted facilities. The other half is spent on the essential community-based care programs for the severely mentally ill. Cuts to community programs only further burden high cost forensic and civil commitment programs, separate families and provide no local community systems when people return.

While the House of Representatives is exploring less harsh cuts to DCF mental health programs, no further cuts can be sustained. Continuing to cripple these programs with further cuts will result in higher state spending and endanger the lives of Floridians in every community statewide. What's worse is that the State will have failed its basic obligation to protect the safety of its citizens and its communities.

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