

AT THE ASSEMBLY - Vets, others lose from budget cuts [All Edition]

The Providence Journal - Providence, R.I.

Author: Elizabeth Gudrais, Journal State House Bureau Date: Mar 20, 2007 Start Page:

B.1 Section: News Text Word Count: 710

Document

Text

Copyright

Providence Journal/Evening Bulletin Mar 20, 2007

The jobs of 35 state workers will be eliminated if the state hires a contractor to provide food service at the home.

* * *

PROVIDENCE -- Residents at the state veterans' home and patients at community health centers will be among those who lose if the state budget passes as proposed, advocates argued yesterday during a State House budget hearing.

The governor's budget envisions saving \$800,000 a year by privatizing food service at the veterans' home in Bristol.

The change will be "devastating" to residents and to the 35 state employees whose jobs will be eliminated, said Anna Vollaro, a Bristol resident who works as a dietitian at the veterans' home.

Vollaro, who has worked at the veterans' home for 24 years, described the staff's dedication to the home's residents: "In bad weather, we have had staff sleep at the veterans' home to ensure that breakfast was served the following day."

The actual cost of the food service contract and the amount saved won't be known until private companies submit bids - due next month - and the state awards a contract.

The budgeted savings assumes that privatization will bring the per-meal cost down from \$9.52 to the industry benchmark of \$5.23 for the 285,000 meals the home serves each year.

Those who testified said they doubted a private company could provide food of comparable quality, or equivalent variety in menus, to what the veterans' home provides, for such a low price.

The 252 people who live at the home are "Rhode Island heroes" who "deserve no less than what they're getting," said Ed Wagner, a Vietnam veteran who has lived at the home for 14 months. "That's all we're asking for," he said. "What we've got - nothing more."

Dennis R. Grilli, executive director of Council 94, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which represents the food-service workers, compared the

proposal to privatize food services at the veterans' home and other state hospitals to "selling off the careers, experience and institutional knowledge of hundreds of dedicated public employees to the lowest bidder." He drew a parallel to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the subject of recent Congressional hearings over stories of labyrinthine bureaucracy, unsanitary conditions and subpar care of wounded veterans.

Gary Alexander, acting director of the state Department of Human Services, pledged: "We would never allow a situation to get that way. We will be reviewing this thoroughly to ensure that the quality of care is not compromised."

Alexander's department provides a variety of services to low-income children and parents, to adults with disabilities, to veterans and to the elderly. Its budget - a proposed \$1.8 billion for the fiscal year that begins July 1 - accounts for roughly a quarter of annual state spending, although federal reimbursement covers more than half of that.

The state-subsidized RIte Care and RIte Share health insurance programs, which the DHS administers, are projected to cost \$460 million next year. Although the governor's budget does not call for broad-based changes in RIte Care eligibility, other changes will affect the eligibility of smaller groups. For instance, former foster children older than 18 who are attending college at state expense would lose RIte Care coverage. And stricter documentation requirements for eligibility, prompted by changes to federal law, are expected to end RIte Care coverage for more than 5,700 people.

It will fall to community health centers, which serve as an alternative to costly emergency room care and don't turn away uninsured patients, to pick up the slack. As people lose health insurance, "we're actually concerned the whole system is going to collapse," Ellen Gurney, a pediatrician with Providence Community Health Centers, said yesterday.

The centers subsist on a mix of funding from the DHS, the state Department of Health and the federal government. But the various funding sources have decreased or held steady in the face of rising need. The uninsured now constitute 13 percent of the Rhode Island population, up from 7 percent in 2002, according to written testimony from Patricia DiLorenzo, director of outreach for the Rhode Island Health Center Association. During the same time period, DiLorenzo said, the number of uninsured patients treated at community health centers has grown by 69 percent.

egudrais@projo.com / (401) 277-7045

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract

(Document Summary)

The state-subsidized RIte Care and RIte Share health insurance programs, which the DHS administers, are projected to cost \$460 million next year. Although the governor's budget

does not call for broad-based changes in RIte Care eligibility, other changes will affect the eligibility of smaller groups. For instance, former foster children older than 18 who are attending college at state expense would lose RIte Care coverage. And stricter documentation requirements for eligibility, prompted by changes to federal law, are expected to end RIte Care coverage for more than 5,700 people.

The centers subsist on a mix of funding from the DHS, the state Department of Health and the federal government. But the various funding sources have decreased or held steady in the face of rising need. The uninsured now constitute 13 percent of the Rhode Island population, up from 7 percent in 2002, according to written testimony from Patricia DiLorenzo, director of outreach for the Rhode Island Health Center Association. During the same time period, DiLorenzo said, the number of uninsured patients treated at community health centers has grown by 69 percent.