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'Spending every dollar I get': Victims of Missouri health care cuts share stories

[Will Schmitt, WSCHMITT@NEWS-LEADER.COM](mailto:WSCHMITT@NEWS-LEADER.COM) Published 5:39 p.m. CT Sept. 11, 2017



(Photo: Will Schmitt/News-Leader)

When Susie Summers of Springfield learned she would have 14 fewer hours of in-home care per week, she knew she wasn't alone.

More than 8,000 Missourians receiving nursing and in-home care were having their services cut, and those who weren't knocked out of the program would still see reductions. Summers' grant was reduced from 42 hours of in-home caregiver assistance a week to 28.

Summers' affliction allows her to speak, move around in a motorized wheelchair, open her front door and use her computer. She says it's easier to describe the few actions she can take rather than list all the things she

can't do.

Despite having one-third fewer hours with a personal assistant, Summers says she's "doing fine."

But she had a question Monday at a town hall in Springfield: Since people like her were seeing cuts, what is the logic in adding more people to the program?

Nobody on the panel, including the director of the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, was able to answer. A department spokeswoman confirmed later the state was still accepting applicants.

The panel, which was co-hosted by Southwest Center for Independent Living and Abilities First, included:

- Randall Williams, director of the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services
- Rep. Lynn Morris, R-Ozark
- Rep. Crystal Quade, D-Springfield
- Greene County Commissioner Lincoln Hough
- Jay Hardenbrook with AARP Missouri.

Despite the best efforts and combined knowledge of the panel, there was no easy way to assuage concerns like those put forward by Summers and others. The bogeyman of ballooning health care costs and decreasing state revenues has emerged from under the bed and shows no signs of retreating.

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Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services Director Randall Williams (seated, wearing a bowtie) speaks at a health-care town hall forum Monday, Sept. 11, 2017, at the Southwest Center for Independent Living in Springfield. Seated from left are Greene County Commissioner Lincoln Hough, Rep. Lynn Morris (R-Ozark), Williams, Rep. Crystal Quade (D-Springfield) and Jay Hardenbrook, a lobbyist with AARP Missouri. The woman behind Williams provided sign language translations throughout the event, which was moderated by Brian Colby of the Missouri Budget Project, standing on the far right. (Photo: Will Schmitt/News-Leader)

In the spotlight are the Missourians losing care as a result of an attempt to cut costs by Gov. Eric Greitens in his first budget attempt, as well as the aftereffects of cancelling a program that provided financial assistance to people with expensive drug prescriptions.

Other health care matters were discussed at the 90-minute forum, but comments about in-home and nursing care dominated the discussion.

The timeline of the cuts

Greitens had the unenviable task of offering a budget that contained significant cuts to several departments. He proposed sparing education and public safety spending, but his budget also recommended raising the standard people need to meet in order to receive certain long-term state health care assistance.

The cuts were initially forecast to affect 20,000 people. Through the budget process, lawmakers winnowed that figure down to about 8,000 seniors and Missourians with disabilities slated to lose care (</story/news/politics/2017/05/11/cuts-disabilities-care-could-restored-if-missouri-makes-enough-money-year/101558724/>).

The House passed a measure that would end a property tax credit for elderly renters and use the proceeds to pay for in-home care. The Senate turned up its nose and sent back a temporary solution: plugging the funding gap for a year by pillaging balances from other state-run funds.

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That plan was passed in the waning moments of the legislative session in May, but Greitens, citing constitutionality concerns, vetoed the fund sweep in late June.

Lawmakers could override the governor at the annual veto session Wednesday, but the odds of them doing so appear slim.

Quade and Morris, the legislative members of Monday's panel, both said they wanted to override Greitens. Both acknowledged that doing so was unlikely, as Quade pointed out lawmakers passed the fix by a narrow margin and need a two-thirds majority Wednesday to pass the temporary funding bill (its proper title is House Committee Bill 3, or "HCB 3").

"It just does not seem like we're going to get the votes to override," Morris said.

Another possibility is a future special legislative session to pass another bill to undo the cuts. Morris is holding out hope for reversing some of the cuts but was not optimistic about the likelihood of doing so in a special session anytime soon.

"The governor's not going to call a special session," Morris said. "He's happy with the results."

Some adapt to cuts, others wait for more

Missouri does monthly reassessments to come up with an individual's level-of-care score. As a result of the cuts, the minimum level-of-care score to receive state help rose from 21 to 24 points (<https://www.sos.mo.gov/CMSImages/AdRules/main//EmergenciesforInternet//19c30-81.030IE.pdf>).

Jami Johnson of Springfield, who has been in a wheelchair for 32 years due to muscular dystrophy, saw a similar reduction in her level of care as Summers.

The drop from six hours to four hours a day means Johnson, already limited in her freedom to move and isolated from others, has to make cruel-sounding choices, such as whether she can budget enough time to take a shower on some days.

"It's just frustrating," Johnson said.

Karen Burnell Ruff, director of policy and advocacy with the Southwest Center for Independent Living, said 127 of the organization's consumers have experienced cuts in hours of in-home care as a result of the across-the-board spending cap that has already taken effect.

Another 38 people receiving services through SCIL could lose care completely due to the increase in level-of-care requirements, Ruff said.

"However, as reassessments are completed we will have a better picture of the true impact as quickly as we can re-calculate after annual reassessment is completed," she said. "The concern of the subjectivity and authenticity of the current assessment tool to identify a true level of care for activities of daily living is real."

"We will fix that today"

Another, separate state health-care offering that was cut was the Missouri Rx Program, or "MORx" for short. MORx allowed eligible people to receive financial aid for half of their co-payments for prescription drug costs.

The 50 percent co-pay coverage ended this year, affecting about 64,000 Missourians, including 4,000 or so in Greene County and 2,900 in Christian, Lawrence and Webster counties.

Among them was Andrew Smith of Springfield, who was injured in a motorcycle accident in 2014 and now struggles to pay his monthly pharmacy bill. It was a big deal for him when he found out about the program earlier this year and saw savings immediately.

"\$120 for me became \$60 a month," Smith said. "It was a big deal for me."

The program ended two months after he enrolled. While the per-person savings may not sound enormous, they can add up for people like Smith, who works part-time to make some money without losing eligibility for government assistance.

"I'm not rich. I'm not poor," he said. "I'm just right, like, stuck here in the middle, spending every dollar I get on health care. That MORx gave me a small glimpse of assistance, but now that it's cancelled, it just reassures my doubts of getting any assistance from government. It's kind of discouraging to know."

While there's no quick fix for the defunded MORx coverage, Smith raised another concern that got the attention of Williams, the state health department director.

Smith mentioned he had been waiting six months and applied twice in hopes the state will cover a \$125 reoccurring cost. He said he hasn't heard anything back.

Since Medicaid in Missouri is run through the Department of Social Services, Williams has no direct sway over the program. But he assured Smith he could expect some kind of response.

"You're gonna hear, because the director of Medicaid is my roommate," Williams said. "I'm gonna lock him out of the apartment. ... That particular issue, we will fix that today."

Other bills on tap and special session chatter

In addition to HCB 3, Greitens rejected a handful of other proposals from the legislature:

- **House Bill 850**, which would have changed the complaint process available to Missouri National Guard soldiers; **vetoed because** Greitens wanted to remain "on notice of soldiers' grievances" due to his position as Missouri's Commander-in-Chief
- **House Concurrent Resolution 19**, which would have offered state funding for a new arts conservatory at the University of Missouri-Kansas City; **vetoed because** it was an example of wasteful spending of millions for "dancer and art students," Greitens said in a [scathing statement](https://governor.mo.gov/news/archive/governor-greitens-issues-his-first-veto) (<https://governor.mo.gov/news/archive/governor-greitens-issues-his-first-veto>)
- **Senate Bill 65**, which would have allowed people to ride in more places on boats; **vetoed because** "this bill would allow two children to ride on an open bow of a speedboat traveling in excess of 40 mph on any body of water, including the Lake of the Ozarks," Greitens wrote in his veto letter
- **Senate Bill 128**, a massive crime omnibus; **vetoed because** of "myriad issues" that "raise serious constitutional, statutory, and policy concerns" despite including "many provisions I support," Greitens wrote.

Greitens also made line-item vetoes to take the UMKC conservatory money off the books and to keep \$2.7 million in State Environmental Improvement Authority Fund money and \$35 million for the Inmate Canteen Fund off Missouri's books.

Beyond these matters of public policy, there are two proverbial elephants in Jefferson City, one on each side of the Capitol.

The Senate may discuss expulsion proceedings against Sen. Maria Chappelle-Nadal following a Facebook post in which she hoped for President Donald Trump to be assassinated. She has apologized and rejected numerous calls for her resignation.

Meanwhile, the House may have a similar situation on its hands regarding Rep. Warren Love, following a Facebook post in which he said splashing paint on a Confederate monument in a Springfield cemetery merited being hanged from a tall tree with a long rope. He has apologized and also says he has no intention of resigning.

Lt. Gov. Mike Parson, the Republican who presides over the Senate, has asked lawmakers to convene a special session to oust Chappelle-Nadal. If that's the case, they'll need 75 percent affirmation from both chambers, unless Greitens decides to call his third special session of 2017.

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