

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Advocates for Missourians with special needs decry proposed budget cuts

By Jesse Bogan • St. Louis Post-Dispatch • April 13, 2015



Advocates for people with special needs referenced the Bible at a press conference Monday meant to shame Missouri state senators over proposed cuts to mental health and other social services in the 2016 budget.

"We are deeply troubled at our faith and our moral base for what is going on as it relates to these cuts," said the Rev. Starsky Wilson, head of the Deaconess Foundation, which invests in child well-being programs.

"The responsibility of those who govern is ultimately tested by their faithfulness and their fidelity to moral values and their capacity to care for the widow ... those who do not have the capacity to speak for themselves, those who do not have the chance to stand up for themselves."

Last week, the Senate passed a budget proposal that would cut 4 percent from portions of the Departments of Mental Health and Health and Senior Services and 6 percent from Social Services.

Gov. Jay Nixon said Friday that cuts aren't needed because of growing state revenue. But Senate Appropriations Chairman Kurt Schaefer, R-Columbia, has said the cuts are an effort to rein in spending in areas that continue to grow each year. Meanwhile, the Department of Mental Health, has recently wrestled with the highest employee turnover rate in state government — 26 percent.

Monday's press conference was held at Paraquad. Speakers were flanked by about a dozen people, some with disabilities, who held signs that read "Stop the budget cuts" and "Don't cut vital services."

"These cuts would have a devastating impact on the services that our community members rely on to get the care that they need," said Jen Bersdale, executive director of Missouri Health Care for All.

She wants lawmakers to adopt the House budget proposal because it doesn't have the same cuts to services in question. Two other press conferences with similar messages were also held Monday in Kansas City and Springfield.

Amy Blouin, executive director of the Missouri Budget Project, said that while a 4 percent hit in funding may not sound like much, departments and services have been cut to the bone over the past decade. She said state funding for non-Medicaid community mental health services were cut by one third between 2007 and 2011.

"At the same time, their demand is increasing," Blouin said.

According to the budget project, which advocates support for vulnerable people, some of the programs that may be affected by the proposed cuts include:

- Treatment services for abused and neglected children.
- Community services for 13,000 people with developmental disabilities.
- Community services for 147,000 adults and children with mental illness.
- Health care and child care for low-income families.

The state contracts with a wide array of nonprofit groups to provide services.

Tom Duff, executive Director of Catholic Family Services, said the agency is "almost at our capacity" in terms of providing counseling and psychiatric services for free or at sliding scale rates. Yet there is continued trauma in the community.

"What about the news we hear every day from our community, state, nation and the world?" he said. "A lot of the tragic events that occur and poor decisions that are made, you hear the concept of a mental condition involved one way or another."