

Advocates for disabled rally against proposed state cuts

Demonstrators chant for more taxes, not cuts to services for health, mental health and child abuse prevention.

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"No more cuts! Raise our taxes!"

That unusual chant was heard Wednesday afternoon outside the Capitol, where about 150 advocates for Texans with disabilities rallied to draw attention to proposed state health and human services budget cuts that they say would be devastating.

As a projected \$18 billion state budget shortfall looms, Texas agencies were asked to submit proposed budget cuts, and everything from child abuse prevention programs to mental health services is on the list. Wednesday marked the first day of the state budget year.

"This is the start of a battle," said Dennis Borel , executive director of the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities .

Scott McCown , executive director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities , which works to help low- and middle-income Texans, led the tax-raising chant. He told the crowd that if this group doesn't chant it, the rest of Texas won't, either.

"Folks, freedom isn't free," said McCown, who also suggested that the state spend every penny of its \$8.2 billion rainy day fund.

That suggestion and the idea of raising taxes are certain to have plenty of opponents, including the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which supports smaller government.

"We don't know that this is the rainiest day we're going to have, so we would be cutting off options we have for the future" by depleting the fund, said Arlene Wohlgemuth , executive director of the foundation.

Among the \$568.7 million in proposed health and human services budget cuts for 2012-13 :

- \$23.6 million to reduce Comprehensive Rehabilitation Services by 70 percent , meaning that 840 fewer people with traumatic brain or spinal cord injuries would receive services.
- \$73.7 million to reduce by 84 percent programs that seek to prevent child abuse and juvenile delinquency, affecting more than 14,000 people.
- \$128.2 million to reduce community mental health services and state mental health hospital capacity, affecting more than 20,000 people.

Bastrop County resident Laura Myers-Doughty , 37, who spoke at the rally, said that getting access to local mental health services has at times been a matter of life or death for her because she has been suicidal. With budget cuts, "a lot of us are going to end up dead," said Myers-Doughty, a mother of two who said she suffers from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder .

State Rep. Elliott Naishtat , D-Austin , encouraged the crowd — which also included advocates for elderly Texans — to demand that the Legislature listen to their concerns. Lawmakers will make decisions on budget cuts once they convene in January.

"Yes, this next budget cycle has the potential to be the worst we've seen in years, but it doesn't have to be," Naishtat said.

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