

HUMAN-SERVICES DIRECTORS

Governor's cuts alarm agencies aiding poor

By Catherine Candisky
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Money for county agencies that serve the poor is being slashed so much that the Strickland administration is creating a dangerous situation for Ohio's most vulnerable residents, human-services directors across the state told the governor yesterday.

The proposed reductions, which would force some counties to cut child-abuse investigations by 75 percent, would have a "severe and catastrophic effect" on Ohio's poor, the directors said in a letter to Gov. Ted Strickland.

"Are we just washing our hands of the poorest of the poor?" said Joel Potts, executive director of the Ohio Job and Family Services Directors' Association. "This is the first time we've diverted money from the neediest."

With double-digit unemployment projected for Ohio, Potts said, "this compounds an already bad situation and makes it outright dangerous."

The county agencies fear the loss of nearly \$200 million a year in state aid, which is spent at the county level on child-protective services, aid to the working poor and the administration of food-stamp, Medicaid and other assistance programs.

"The funding is utilized to provide essential services for Ohio's most economically disadvantaged, with over 75 percent of the individuals we serve being either children, disabled or elderly," Potts wrote. "It is shocking that the very organizations that are entrusted with administering these safety-net programs are taking such severe cuts."

Strickland spokeswoman Amanda Wurst said the governor worked to minimize the impact his budget would have on child welfare, holding the reduction to 5 percent and advocating for federal stimulus dollars to help.

The governor allocated \$1.1 billion for cash assistance and work supports, including child care, to help Ohioans who are out of work or need child care, Wurst said.

Of the cuts, she said: "Obviously, these are not decisions that anyone wants to make, but the governor had to make very difficult choices."

As the ranks of the unemployed and uninsured swell, more Ohioans are seeking government help, causing record caseload growth in cash assistance, Medicaid, food stamps and other taxfunded programs.

Potts noted that \$62 million a year in aid to be eliminated under Strickland's plan is used almost exclusively to investigate child-abuse and -neglect allegations and provide other protective services for youth.

Two-thirds of Ohio's 88 counties say they would need to reduce or eliminate their adult protective services under Strickland's plan.

Counties are poised to lose an additional \$100 million a year that covered administration costs. That's money to employ caseworkers, obtain medical tests and take other steps to assess the eligibility of low-income and disabled Ohioans for various programs.

Another \$31 million a year that would be cut went for support services to the working poor such as local job training and help with transportation and vehicle repairs.

After three rounds of cuts and other adjustments in the current two-year budget that ends June 30, county agencies have been forced to trim their staffs and programs.

County-level officials report that nearly 1 in 3 Ohioans who walk into county welfare offices for help are new to the system. Caseloads for cash assistance are up 14 percent in the past 18 months, reversing a decade-long decline.

Dispatch reporter Mark Niquette contributed to this story.

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