

State budget cuts devastating the most vulnerable Ohioans

Sunday, November 22, 2009 4:11 AM

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

COOLVILLE, Ohio -- "Here's home," Lori Hopkins said, gesturing toward a dilapidated camper parked along a gravel road in the hills of southeastern Ohio.

"And here's where we do our business," she deadpanned, turning to the surrounding woods.

Hopkins, 29, and her three children have lived in an 8-by-16-foot camper with no working toilet or running water since August, when she left an abusive relationship. Her car broke down a few days later, hampering her efforts to land a job as a nursing assistant and find an apartment.

She tried to get help from the Athens County Department of Job and Family Services, but just weeks earlier state budget cuts forced the agency to abolish a program that paid for emergency car repairs. The aid was supposed to keep low-income Ohioans working instead of on welfare.

Although Hopkins says things could be worse, it's hard to imagine how.

However, things in Ohio *have* gotten much worse for many people in the four months since passage of a state budget that whacked tens of millions of dollars from safety-net programs. Many of the "sky is falling" consequences predicted by advocates in July have become somber reality in November.

Consider some of what's happening statewide:

Thousands of mental-health patients are being turned away from treatment centers each month, outreach to the homeless is being curtailed, protective services for abused and neglected elderly Ohioans have been scaled back or eliminated, a drug-assistance program for extremely poor adults with chronic ailments such as diabetes ended Oct. 31, after-school programs are being dismantled, and a state-funded preschool program that prepared thousands of poor children for kindergarten has been abolished.

Perhaps most cruelly, the cuts have touched even poor families who have lost loved ones. With government assistance for indigent burials dried up, some have been forced to dig graves for their own family members, and forgo embalming and burial vaults.

In many cases, the pain came not only from last summer's budget slashing, but from the impact of previous budget cuts piled one on top of another at the state, county and city level. All this comes crashing down on Ohioans at a time when record numbers are turning to the state for help.

In the past year alone, those added to the food-stamps rolls would fill Ohio Stadium nearly three times. The number of Ohioans who qualify for Medicaid, the tax-funded health care for the poor, is now nearly 1 in 5. And a federal report last week revealed that more than 600,000 Buckeye households struggle to put food on the table.

In many cases, the wait for assistance at county welfare offices can stretch several weeks because cuts in state aid have forced counties to lay off thousands of caseworkers. Worse yet, mental-health patients, even though they qualify for service, might have to wait two months for an appointment with a psychologist or a year to see a psychiatrist.

"How can we turn our backs on seniors, the mentally ill and the children during this economic catastrophe?" asked Joel Potts, executive director of the Ohio Job and Family Services Directors' Association.

"This is the time we should be coming together to make sure people aren't falling through the cracks, but what we've done with this budget is make bigger cracks."

Gov. Ted Strickland said he's been forced to reduce state spending, but admits he doesn't like what he sees.

"I would certainly hope that no one had to bury a loved one without assistance as a result of cuts in our budget and if I become aware of such a circumstance, I'll do whatever I can to make sure that that doesn't happen again," he said.

"But there is no doubt, and I have said over and over and over, that we are living through a historical period that is unlike anything that we have experienced in many decades. That's the reality of our time, and I am painfully aware of it, and am trying to do what I think I can do within the limits of my powers as governor to improve the situation and to try to see that those who are in greatest need have access to the most essential things that are necessary for their continued well-being or in some cases even survival."

Athens County's emergency car-repair program is just one example of this year's budget fatalities.

When the county Department of Job and Family Services lost \$1 million a year in state aid, it was forced to abolish that service along with such programs as home-nurse visits to the severely disabled and assistance for low-income children to visit the dentist. In all, three dozen jobs were chopped.

"Four or five of the lost positions were caseworkers, which means some people wait several weeks to get in for an appointment," said Jack Frech, director of the county agency.

The vehicle-repair program, which had been spending about \$30,000 a month, was one of many work supports created following the 1996 overhaul of the nation's welfare system. The goal was to help people become self-sufficient, trading their monthly welfare check for a paycheck.

Hopkins is a case in point. She can't work until her car is fixed and she's now using her \$600-a-month welfare check to pay for repairs a few dollars at a time. Her plan to move into an apartment has been put off indefinitely.

Shaking her head, Hopkins said she never dreamed her family would have to weather the winter in a camper crammed with clothes, toys and gallon jugs of water for cooking and bathing.

An extension cord running from a nearby utility line provides electricity for a small refrigerator, microwave and a pair of space heaters. To prepare for the cold, Hopkins is covering the windows with plastic and has put metal sheeting around the exterior to keep the wind from under the camper.

"I left a three-bedroom apartment for this," she said.

Her father gave her the camper, which is parked on his property. Her brother lives with his wife and three kids in a mobile home nearby.

Advocates for the poor, disabled and mentally ill have been pleading with the governor and legislative leaders to not turn their backs.

"Ohio's families that were already hanging by their fingertips are falling into the abyss," Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, executive director of the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks, told lawmakers during a recent hearing.

Among the hardest-hit are mental-health services.

In three southern Ohio counties, more than 160 people seeking mental-health services were turned away in the past few months, said Ronald Adkins, executive director of the Gallia-Jackson-Meigs Board of Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services.

No money and no staff make it impossible to treat new patients, except for crisis services, he said.

"It is devastating," Adkins said. "For many of the people, it's difficult to step forward and admit there are some issues. This is like slamming them into a brick wall."

Rod Hollingsworth, Adkins' counterpart in Coshocton, Guernsey, Morgan, Muskingum, Noble and Perry counties, fears that scarcity of mental-health services and the depressed economy are fueling a dramatic increase in suicides. There have been three murder-suicides and 28 suicides in the area through the end of October -- double the number to date in 2008.

"It's heartbreaking. I don't know what else to say," Hollingsworth said. "You worry about the people, whether it's a long-term client or someone new. You worry about what's going to happen to them."

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