

Claypool, community leaders 'deeply concerned' about healthcare cuts in Stroger's 2007 Cook County budget

BY GARY BARLOW

STAFF WRITER

Advocates for HIV/AIDS service providers and drug treatment programs are up in arms over healthcare cuts in Cook County Board President Todd Stroger's proposed 2007 county budget.

"Everyone in the AIDS community is deeply concerned," AIDS Foundation of Chicago executive director Mark Ishaug said Jan. 22.

Ishaug said Stroger's plan to close 16 of the Cook County Bureau of Health Services 26 community clinics would decimate "the single most important institution in the state of Illinois for people with AIDS."

"They serve 8,000 people with HIV," Ishaug said. "These are, for the most part, people who don't have health insurance. ... Their first line of assistance is the county health system."

The cuts are part of Stroger's

proposal to deal with a \$500-million deficit in order to balance the county's \$3-billion budget. In addition to closing a majority of the county's health clinics, Stroger's plan calls for an additional, unspecified \$62 million in cuts for the health bureau.

Ishaug said closing some of the clinics would leave huge areas of Cook County without accessible HIV/AIDS services, including communities hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic.

While Stroger has said people affected by the cuts and closings could go to other county health clinics, as well as John H. Stroger Hospital, for care, Ishaug said that's impractical and difficult for many.

"The CORE Center (at Stroger Hospital) is critical to HIV/AIDS care, but it's perceived as 'the AIDS center,' and some people don't want to be seen coming and going there," Ishaug said. "Because of that fear and stigma and their need

to be close to home, many people go to the clinics."

One clinic closing in particular concerns Ishaug and others—the plan to close the Cermak Health Services clinic, which provides care to Cook County Jail inmates and detainees.

"100,000 people pass through the County Jail system each year," Ishaug said. "They rely on (Cermak.) The care they provide is critical."

Ishaug said that care includes STD screening and HIV screening for a population that's among the highest risk for HIV/AIDS. Another innovative and highly praised part of the county's services to that population is being targeted for elimination—a program administered by Haymarket Center to provide substance abuse treatment to County female detainees.

"It's going to reduce 300 treatment slots for the city of Chicago," said Haymarket Vice

President Dan Lustig. "There's not enough treatment slots now. This is one of the vehicles the county uses to break the cycle of crime, drug use and HIV."

Lustig said Haymarket's program with the Cook County Jail system serves more than 2,500 clients each year. Without it, he said, the onus for treatment would fall on private community service providers already stretched too thin. Many of the people served by the program, Lustig said, simply won't continue to get treatment, meaning they'll be more vulnerable to substance abuse and STDs and more likely to engage in criminal behavior.

"These are women that have all the high-risk factors for HIV," Lustig said. "To completely eliminate this program is ridiculous."

One of Stroger's strongest critics—Cook County Comm. Forrest Claypool (12th)—said Stroger's proposal would bal-

ance the budget by cutting critical services such as health clinics and programs, while failing to eliminate the fat and waste in the County budget.

"Todd Stroger is leaving untouched a huge bureaucracy of paper pushers who have nothing to do with providing health care," Claypool said. "It's clearly a strategy to protect political jobs."

In the wake of the budget deficit and proposed cuts, Claypool and others have criticized Stroger's recent promotions and pay raises for a number of his politically connected allies and supporters.

"There's a lot to dislike about this budget," Claypool said. "It's going to cause a lot of pain and suffering."

The County Commissioners are holding a series of public hearings on the budget plan through next week. Claypool, Ishaug and Lustig said people who oppose the proposed health cuts should make their

views known at those hearings.

"We need their voice," Claypool said.

COOK COUNTY BUDGET HEARINGS SCHEDULE

Public hearings on Cook County Board President Todd Stroger's proposed 2007 budget are scheduled:

Jan. 25, 6:30 p.m.
Skokie Courthouse
5600 W. Old Orchard Rd,
Skokie

Jan. 29, 10 a.m.
County Building, County
Board Room, 5th Floor,
118 N. Clark, Chicago

Jan. 30, 6:30 p.m.
Maywood Courthouse
1311 Maybrook Sq., May-
wood