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Local agencies weigh "frightening" budget scenarios

BY ALEX PARKER

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As the countdown to doomsday ticks away, human services agencies in Chicago and across the state are nervously anticipating the result of a legislative showdown between Gov. Pat Quinn and the General Assembly.

At stake are services to thousands of Chicagoans, including the elderly, those suffering from mental illness, and uninsured.

If Quinn's proposed income tax increase fails to pass the General Assembly this week, more than \$9 billion could be cut from health and human services programs. The state has a record budget deficit of at least \$11.6 billion, and Quinn is hoping a tax hike would raise badly-needed revenue for the state.

Republicans are calling for reform to the state's pension program as a precursor to an agreement. Meanwhile, local agencies are preparing for a dramatic loss in funding, which leaders say will cut vital services and put a strain on their remaining meager resources.

"Agencies that a year ago had cash to get by when the state didn't pay them, that cash is gone," says John Peller, director of government affairs for the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. "We all have to think very, very quickly about the societal impact, the economic impact and the human impact that these budget cuts will have."

Daniel Lyonsmith, an aide to Allan Bergman, president of the Anixter Center, which serves more than 5,000 people with developmental disabilities, says human services are chronically under-funded by the General Assembly.

"This is something they have all been doing to themselves for a long time, and human services is the one that pays the price," he says. "This is a crisis that has been put off and put off and put off. They don't make any serious policy actions until there's a looming deadline."

And the consequences of the legislature's procrastination will be far-reaching, Lyonsmith says. The Anixter Center will likely cut a program that secures jobs for about 200 developmentally disabled people.

It will lose all of its \$5 million in state grant funding, and it may have to lay off a quarter of its 400 employees.

"It's shocking to me," he says. "I think what I'm shocked about is the political system. This is how we do it here."

Peller says many low-income HIV/AIDS patients will lose access to free medication, if an estimated \$15 million in HIV/AIDS funding is cut.

"It's a third world situation we're facing here. This is what happens in Africa, not in Illinois, or Chicago or the United States. We're all going to pay the price," he says. Peller says fewer medications will be available, and for the first time ever, there will be a waiting list for medication.

The "most significant and frightening" costs, he says, will be the cuts to HIV prevention and education programs. Peller estimates about \$7 million of the roughly \$10 million allocated to prevention programs would be cut, and many outreach programs in minority communities would suffer.

"The long-range costs of the budget cuts are almost unthinkable," Peller says.

Advocates are also concerned about the number of jobs that could be lost if agencies are forced to make cuts. The lack of tax revenue and health insurance could further deteriorate the state's economic situation, they say.

"Legislators are putting politics ahead of people's needs," Peller says. "They need to look at solutions and to look at realistic solutions...there is no magic bullet here."

Quinn recalled the General Assembly to Springfield; a vote on the budget is expected Wednesday.

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