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REACH early intervention program in jeopardy: Proposed changes dismay parents

By CATHERINE BAUM
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Saturday, February 27, 2010

A highly regarded statewide early intervention program is facing a \$2 million shortfall this year and another \$10.5 million shortfall the next fiscal year, which advocates say is the greatest financial setback since it was created more than two decades ago.

A program of the state Department of Public Health, it was spared cutting over the past two years by the use of federal stimulus dollars, which have now run out.

To fill the budget gap, Gov. Deval Patrick has proposed making eligibility standards for children to receive services stricter, and increasing parent costs by at least six times the current fee. If implemented, these changes would affect one out of every three children in early intervention, according to the state Early Intervention Consortium.

In Northampton, Barbara Black, early childhood coordinator for Northampton schools, estimates that three out of the 14 children in the early childhood program would become ineligible for early intervention under the proposed changes.

"That's a pretty hefty chunk," Black said. "Over time, every year if there were a few kids who didn't get services, that adds a few kids every year who are going to be behind themselves. It could have a cumulative affect."

Parents say the fee hikes would be devastating.

"It's really difficult to see a proposal around fees that really takes aim at middle-class families who already are struggling fiscally," said Darleen Corbett, director of REACH Early Intervention Program at ServiceNet in Northampton, which serves about 65 families in Hampshire County as well as families in Franklin County and in the North Quabbin region.

The Department of Public Health is poised to act on the shortfall by April 1. Under the proposed regulations, children would need to exhibit greater disabilities in order to be eligible for services when they are younger than preschool age.

"It's called early intervention, not late intervention," said Dawna Holmes, of Sunderland, whose 3-year-old son has autism. "Before you know it they'll have to be 70 percent impaired before they can qualify, and where does it stop?"

"Taking a resource away from somebody seems irresponsible; It puts these children at greater risk."

Holmes' son started receiving in-home services after REACH gave him his provisional diagnosis at 15 months, four months before his medical diagnosis.

"The services were just invaluable - nothing would have made sense without these people coming into our home and helping us point out things that were triggers for some of the behaviors," Holmes said. "It changed the way I communicated with him. They've taught us how to think from a child outward instead of trying to fit him into a system that's already formed."



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State funding now supports 59 early intervention programs for more than 30,000 children and their families. Many families would not be able to afford the services, Corbett said.

Families testified against the changes at a public hearing in Northampton Thursday and will do the same Monday at the Department of Public Health in Boston.

Kelly Tunstall, of Chicopee, who told her story at the Thursday hearing, said if the proposed fees are implemented she would go from paying nothing for the services her child receives to paying from \$600 to \$1,500 in fees.

"To think a parent of a special needs child who has to be home with their child is going to be able to pay this money when you've already got the burden of trying to pay your bills, it just doesn't add up," said Tunstall, who has a 3-year-old daughter with autism and a 20-month old daughter with signs of cerebral palsy.

Without the REACH services, Tunstall said her daughter would not be the same person she is now.

"It wasn't just therapy for her," said Tunstall. She said she plans to join the protest against the proposed changes with her children at Patrick's office Monday. "It was life-changing."

Meanwhile, fewer children in early intervention implies more health risks and financial burdens to public school districts as those children get older.

"It could end up costing the district more money, because their needs are likely to be greater if they don't get early intervention," said Black of Northampton. Every year the early childhood program takes student referrals from REACH.

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