

Penny wise, pound foolish?

LARRY HENDRICKS Assistant City Editor | Posted: Thursday, March 11, 2010 5:30 am | [\(0\) Comments](#)



Buy this photo Kendra Enriquez Martha Nickles discusses how health care cuts will negatively affect her and her two sons, Thomas and Michael, in Williams, Arizona on Wednesday morning. (Kendra Enriquez/Arizona Daily Sun)

Williams resident Martha Nickles worries for herself and her two boys.

Son Thomas, 14, has Asperger's syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Without his medication, he acts out violently in school.

Son Michael, 13, also has Asperger's and ADHD. He also had a mild case of cerebral palsy as a child. Without his medications, he has seizures.

Nickles, who lives at the poverty line and qualifies for Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System insurance, needs medications for a thyroid condition and high blood pressure.

In all, she receives about \$900 a month in medications through AHCCCS.

"If I don't have this program, 90 percent of my income will go to medications," Nickles said.

But the Legislature is considering lowering income eligibility limits for AHCCCS in order to help balance the budget. And Nickles, along with more than 310,000 other Arizonans, will no longer be eligible as a result.

FAMILIES SUFFER

"The bottom line is the consumers and families who need these services, they're the ones who are going to suffer," said Mick Pattinson, chief executive officer of the Northern Arizona Behavioral Health Authority. "It's just so unfortunate."

In 2000, voters approved Proposition 204, which requires the state to provide free health care to anybody who falls below the federal poverty level -- about \$18,000 a year for a family of three and \$22,000 a year for a family of four.

Prior to the vote, those eligible could earn only up to 33 percent of the federal poverty level -- about \$6,000 for a family of three and \$7,300 for a family of four.

That equates to one person in a family working part time at minimum wage, Pattinson said.

In order for the state to receive federal funding for the Prop. 204 expansion, the state had to match one-third of the federal allotment.

The state proposed to do so by using funds received with a settlement with tobacco companies, but that funding has been insufficient and the shortfall has been made up through the general fund.

According to a study conducted in February by researchers at the ASU business school, with the rollback of Proposition 204, the state would save \$765 million next year.

But, by not providing matching funds, the study states that the state would also lose the federal funding stream, another \$1.5 billion.

35,000 AFFECTED IN REGION

Pattinson said that about 10 percent of the population in the five northern counties who are now eligible for AHCCCS benefits would be affected by the rollback -- about 35,000 people.

Of those, about 3,500 are receiving behavioral health services across northern Arizona, and about 600 of those are in Coconino County.

Linda Cowan, CEO at The Guidance Center in Flagstaff, said 46 percent (759 people) of the behavioral health center's existing clients would no longer be eligible.

That would constitute a \$7 million to \$8 million loss of services from the \$17 million TGC receives from NARBHA, Cowan said.

"I'm scared," Cowan said. "I have to say I'm concerned."

Families will be disrupted when children will not get the psychiatric services they need, Cowan said. Severely mentally ill adults, dependent on The Guidance Center and

medications to get them through the day, will no longer be eligible. People desperate for help with a substance addiction will be turned away.

"That hope that all our clients have ... where does that hope go? It goes away," Cowan said.

JOBS LOST, TOO

Pattinson said that with such a significant reduction in services, another side effect of the rollback will be felt.

"A lot of people will be put out of work," Pattinson said.

According to the ASU study, about 46,000 people will be put out of work statewide with the rollback.

Additionally, hospitals will be seeing an increase in business, Cowan said.

Rick Swanson, marketing and development director at North Country HealthCare, said of the clinic's 38,000 patients, 13,060 are covered by AHCCCS.

Based on the statewide estimate, about 3,200 NCHC patients will lose coverage and will have to go to the sliding-fee scale, Swanson said.

Pattinson said, "I predict that we will see emergency room and law enforcement centers where people are detained a large influx of activity."

MORE UNCOMPENSATED CARE

Janet Dean, spokesperson for Flagstaff Medical Center, said the hospital is still working on how the rollback will affect the hospital. But she said the rollback definitely will have an impact -- especially in acuity of illness staff will see.

People with no health insurance will wait longer periods and illnesses will worsen before presenting at the hospital for treatment, which is also more costly, Dean said.

About 27 percent of the hospital's gross revenue is generated from people enrolled in AHCCCS, Dean said. The hospital gets about 90,000 patient visits a year.

She added that although it is hard to quantify, the hospital will also experience "significant" increases in uncompensated care. Therefore, all hospitals throughout the state will likely be "cost shifting" and passing "hidden health care taxes" to insured consumers.

OTHER CHILDREN, TOO

In Williams, Nickles continues to struggle to make ends meet. She is in subsidized housing and on food stamps, but she still has utility bills and must pay a portion of her housing bill. Her ex-husband helps with child support and the boys qualify for Social Security.

But she definitely would not be able to afford \$900 a month for medications, she said.

If she could say something to the Legislature about the rollback, what would it be?

"Please don't do it, because it doesn't just affect me," she said, adding that she's not only worried about her sons, she worries about others who don't have as high functioning children as she does.

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