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Foster parents fear effects of Illinois budget

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By **Stephanie Benhart**, sbenhart@qconline.com

Local foster care advocates say Illinois lawmakers must do better than a proposed 2010 state budget that would cut subsidies by 50 percent for 9,000 foster parents around the state.

The budget approved May 31 by the state legislature would cut \$7 billion from state programs, including reductions to human services. If Gov. Pat Quinn and the legislature do not find an alternate agreement, what the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services calls a "doomsday budget" will go into effect July 1.

Bill Steinhauser, president/CEO of Bethany for Children & Families in Moline, is urging lawmakers to return to Springfield and create a budget that better serves Illinois residents.

"(Foster care's goal is) to help kids heal, give them a sense of belonging and being loved, a family to grow up in," said Mr. Steinhauser. "This budget disrupts all that."

Foster parents receive a little more than \$12.24 per day for a child's care. The proposed budget would cut that amount to \$6 a day, according to information from Bethany for Children and Families. Mr. Steinhauser said the legislature has alternatives, such as raising taxes, although it is unpopular.

"We have this chaos, uncertainty and insecurity around the state for services," Mr. Steinhauser said. "We need to solve this once and for all. This uncertainty and unpredictability is no way to govern."

Bethany's Therapeutic Recreation Program, which helps children face socialization and behavioral issues, likely will be cut if the budget goes through.

"If that program goes away, a lot of parents relying on it unfortunately will be left high and dry," Mr. Steinhauser said. The Phoenix program out of Carbon Cliff, which provides special education with social worker support, also will lose state aid, he said.

Because of state cuts, some foster parents may be forced to return foster children to the state, he added. Without available space, cots may have to be set up in administrative buildings to house the children.



Photo: Tricia Mans, a foster parent of Coal Valley, are among local residents saying Illinois lawmakers must do better than a proposed 2010 state budget that would cut subsidies by 50 percent for 9,000 foster parents around the state.

Mr. Steinhauser said not having enough money to care for the kids could be damaging to their health. If the kids must be returned to DCFS, he said, they may believe they are unwanted and unloved, which can wear away at egos and self-esteem.

"Kids don't do well with unpredictability, without being safe or feeling secure," he said.

Foster parent Tricia Mans of Coal Valley said the proposed budget directly affects both foster and biological parents. She said ramifications will include fewer social workers available to take children to appointments and a change in caseworker assignments.

If the budget goes through, Ms. Mans said, more demands will be put on foster parents.

"We do what we can with the minimal money we receive," she said.

Although raising a foster child costs money, Ms. Mans said she believed it would be difficult to give up a child because of subsidy cuts.

"If they cut my money, I'll still take them," she said. "I couldn't see giving them back; you're attached to them. You make do with what you have."

Ms. Mans said her biggest fear is there will not be enough money to care for the children. When a child first enters foster care, she said, they are given an allotment for necessities. If that allotment money goes away, the kids will be the ones who suffer, she said.

"It's a child," Ms. Mans said. "It's not their fault they're in the system."

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