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Developmental Disabilities Services program sees caseload increase, budget gap of \$3 million to \$4.5 million

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The Developmental Disabilities Services program is grappling with a budget gap of \$3 million to \$4.5 million. If its caseload continues to rise at the same rate, this number could double by the end of the year, according to state officials.

The program, which is housed in the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living (DAIL), funds private nonprofit organizations that provide services to more than 3,000 people with developmental disabilities.

At a Developmental Disabilities Services State Program Standing Committee meeting last week, Susan Wehry, the commissioner for DAIL, quelled the group's worst fear — that the department wouldn't seek a budget adjustment at all for fiscal year 2013.

Wehry assured the committee that DAIL is requesting additional funds, but said she couldn't give them a specific figure. "The conversation is still ongoing as to where that number should settle," Wehry said.

Pinning down a number is difficult, the commissioner explained, because they don't know what's causing the increase in demand and whether or not the trend will continue. The department doesn't have long to settle on this number — it must submit budget adjustment requests to the House Appropriations Committee in early January.

Jim Reardon, commissioner of the Department of Finance and Management, said the Shumlin administration will request an adjustment in the \$3 million to \$4.5 million range — equal to the current gap — but Wehry projected that if the trend persists, the shortfall could be twice as large at the fiscal year's end.

Wehry said she felt "very confident" the budget adjustment will be approved, but the absence of a concrete figure left some advocates unsettled. "There was a sense of relief that at least some of the need is going to be met, but we continue to be concerned about ongoing unmet needs," said Karen Schwartz of the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council.

If the budget adjustment isn't approved or isn't sufficient, the department may have to make cuts. "If all else fails, then we'll have discussion about rescissions and what that will look like," Wehry said.

The budget gap stems from a growth in the new caseloads; DAIL staff say they can point to a few trends, but they don't have a catch-all theory to explain the increased demand. According to the deputy commissioner of DAIL, Camille George, the increase in demand is largely due to a recent increase in the number and needs of refugees. It may also stem from several long-term trends that the department was already aware of — increases in the number of people diagnosed with autism, the number of aging parents with disabled people, and the number of aging people with these disabilities.

Public safety services, which provide supervision to people who are considered a potential threat to public safety, are also eating up an increasing portion of the Developmental Disabilities budget. The number of people under supervision has leapt from 165 to 220 over the past five years, according to George. Wehry said they need to look at whether or not these resources are being spent prudently, but it would involve a "broader public policy discussion."

Under the program's current system of care plan, the upper cap that can be spent on a single person is \$200,000, but under "extraordinary circumstances" this cap can be raised to \$300,000. Since 2007, the number of people deemed to be in an "extraordinary circumstance" has doubled, from 10 to 19. Wehry said they may need to refine the criteria used to determine who qualifies for this elevated funding.

The budget for Developmental Disabilities Services in FY 2013 was \$157.2 million, which, according to Wehry, is \$1.2 million less than the FY 2012 budget. It allotted about \$6 million in anticipation of new cases. The department uses a standard procedure to calculate its budget request — it's based on the average caseload for three prior years. (The year immediately prior is not included because the department submits its budget a year in advance.)

But Theresa Wood, co-chair of the committee, said that some people are questioning why the 2013 budget request wasn't higher to begin with since demand has been growing for the last several years.

"It was really an under-appropriation based upon past need ... so from some perspectives, it feels like, well, we would have known that this was going to happen," Wood said.

According to Marybeth McCaffrey, director of the Division of Disability and Aging Services, if the budget adjustment fails to span the shortfall, the department has three other "tools" at its disposal. It can amend its system of care plan to narrow services, spend one-time funds or make cuts.

None of these are attractive options, Schwartz said.

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