

STATE HOUSE

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Budget proposal would cut addiction treatment funding

The \$4 million cut would eliminate state funding for 10 centers statewide

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PORTLAND - The LePage Administration is proposing to cut state funding for [residential treatment of alcohol and drug addictions](#), according to the Maine Office of Substance Abuse.

The \$4 million cut would eliminate state funding for 10 centers statewide and would force them to either find new revenue sources or stop taking in addicts and alcoholics. One of those, Serenity House in downtown Portland, would lose \$376,000 - more than half its revenue, said Robert Dawber, executive director of the 44-year-old treatment center for men.

"We would have to close our doors," he said.

The two-year budget proposed by Gov. Paul LePage would eliminate a total of \$4.4 million in state funding for substance abuse programs. The money, part of the Fund for a Healthy Maine, comes from a legal settlement with tobacco companies and would effectively be used to help pay for increasing Medicaid costs.

The loss of the \$4.4 million also would trigger a reduction in federal aid of about \$1.3 million, according to Guy Cousins, director of the Office of Substance Abuse. The overall loss of \$5.7 million represents about 20 percent of the agency's budget, he said.

Members of the Legislature will take up the proposal at a public hearing Friday morning in Augusta.

Serenity House, one of 13 residential substance abuse agencies in the state, relies on the funding to house and treat about 150 men a year, Dawber said. Other agencies that would lose state funding include Crossroads, a residential center for women in Windham, and Day One, a residential center for adolescents in South Portland.

The state would continue to support three agencies statewide to provide emergency detox shelters to take addicts or alcoholics in for several days at a time. The cut would affect 10 centers that treat residents for as long as two or three months.

It's unknown how many of the residential agencies could survive the loss of state funding. Some rely more heavily than others on Medicaid funding, which would not be affected by the proposed cuts.

The loss of treatment center beds, however, would add to a backlog of alcoholics and drug addicts seeking help around the state.

"Every organization has a waiting list," Dawber said.

Serenity House has 33 beds for men who sometimes arrive from hospitals or jail cells and have no money, health insurance or family support, Dawber said. The men stay for 90 days of intensive counseling before transitioning back to life and work in the community.

"Guys die out there without treatment like this," said Michael Rodriguez, a staff counselor.

The house has a staff of seven full-time employees and about a dozen part-timers and operates on a \$660,000 annual budget, according to Dawber. It spends only about \$3.90 a day to feed each resident, in part because of support from the Good Shepherd Food Bank.

The center rehabilitates men at a fraction of the cost of caring for them in jails or hospital emergency rooms, he said. "It's a good deal."

The possibility of losing Serenity House worries Ralph Johnson of Portland.

He would be on the streets, still drinking, if he had not been referred to Serenity House about seven weeks ago, he said. "I would be essentially homeless and casting about without purpose or guidance."

The intense counseling and time at the center is very different than spending a few days in a detox center, he said. "I've been in and out and in and out (of detox centers), and this is the first time I've felt confident that I have a handle on what's going on."

Johnson, 63, has a college degree and work experience and is paying his own way through the treatment program. He also has a new career plan. "I'd like to spend the rest of my life helping people and volunteering or helping other addicts," he said.

Now, he and other residents are worried Serenity House won't be around to help them settle back into the community, and stay clean.

"Lord help us if we have to go to any of the hospitals for additional support. They're backed up to the hilt," he said.

Many of the men at Serenity House are battling addiction to prescription painkillers, which ranks a close second to alcohol among the top reasons Mainers seek treatment. Maine is the clear leader nationwide in the percentage of its population addicted to painkillers such as OxyContin, according to federal data.

"The drug is so addictive that people don't realize how involved they are in maintaining their addiction," Dawber said.

The drugs are a leading cause of such crimes as thefts and burglaries. About 70 percent of the men who come through Serenity House have been in jail, Dawber said.

Crime is the single biggest reason that substance abuse costs the state more than \$1 billion a year, according to Cousins, the Office of Substance Abuse director.

Reducing treatment capacity could increase those costs, he said. "If they are not able to seek other services what they will do is attempt to maintain their addictions."

Cousins said the state agency decided it was most important to save funding for its prevention programs and maintain funding for emergency detox shelters, which he called the final safety net.

"This is a very challenging budget," Cousins said. "(Five-and-a-half) million is a pretty large number to get to, and residential services are the most expensive services to maintain. ... We're going to have to find some other way to bring them into some sort of treatment environment."