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Supporters of mental health, drug treatment providers rally for funds

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Shouting the slogan "keep the doors open," several hundred supporters of Maryland's mental health and drug treatment programs rallied outside the State House in Annapolis Wednesday to protest proposed cuts in the budget for compensating care providers. advertisement

Mental illness patients, recovering drug addicts and parents of children with those problems were among the speakers as members of the Behavioral Care Coalition gathered to seek the restoration of about \$23 million. Those funds were trimmed from such programs under the Hogan and O'Malley administrations as a means to close a revenue shortfall.

Cathy Meyers, who runs the Center for Children mental health care services provider in Southern Maryland, compared the state's budget-cutting to the shipping line that operated the Titanic.

"We as providers no longer have lifeboats. We no longer have longstanding crew members who are ready to go down with the ship," she said.

Meyers said her 26-year-old center provides help to about 3,000 patients in Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's counties. But she said she's had to cut staff hours and deny raises because of state budget cuts to the amount the center is compensated.

"Where do these 3,000 children and families go when we close our doors?" she demanded.

Other speakers found a contradiction between Hogan's emphasis on fighting what he calls a heroin epidemic and his budget's cuts in compensation for drug treatment providers.

"How can we say on one hand it's an epidemic and a state of emergency and then take money away?" said Toni Torsch, whose son died of a drug overdose in 2010.

The advocates hear from several legislators who support the, including Democratic Senate Finance Committee Chairman Thomas M. "Mac" Middleton of Charles County, Republican Sen. Adelaide Eckardt of Dorchester County and Democratic Del. Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk. All said they would work to put more money into the programs.

Dan Martin, policy director at Mental Health Association of Maryland, said demand for behavioral health provider services -- including drug treatment -- has increased by 65 percent since the recession. However, he said, providers have received inflation increases in only six of the past 20 years.

Martin said that when providers cannot offer employees periodic raises, "it makes the work force and issue."

"We're constantly asking our providers to do more with less," he said. "Some just can't afford to keep the door open."

State Budget Secretary David R. Brinkley said this week that the Hogan administration is "taking a sharp knife to everything." Brinkley said the administration will look to the March revenue estimates to see whether more money might become available to restore some of the cuts.

"We're examining every request we have for the budget," he said. "This certainly would be one of them."

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