

Children victims of Pennsylvania budget crunch, advocates say

Friday, June 12, 2009

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The Express-Times

BETHLEHEM | When Betsy Gilgoff told a mother last October that after four months of waiting for a child care subsidy she would receive help, the woman began to cry.

When she got the call, the woman was writing her resignation letter because she had no child care for the next two days, said Gilgoff, Northampton County's executive director for Child Care Information Services.

Gilgoff hung up heartened and discouraged all at once.

"I also knew there were many others on that waiting list," she told a crowd of about 40 people at a town-hall meeting on children Thursday night.

Today, that waiting list for child care subsidy is eight months long and growing in Northampton County, and it is more than a yearlong wait in Lehigh County, Gilgoff said. She was one of five panelists who spoke about how potential state budget and other funding cuts could hurt Lehigh Valley children.

Gov. Ed Rendell's proposed \$29 billion budget holds up his promise of increased state funding for public education, which was later bolstered by millions in stimulus funds.

Then in early May the state Senate passed a new budget bill that would roll back state support of public education to 2006-07 levels and use \$728 million of stimulus money to bring it back up to 2008-09.

Many at Thursday night's meeting pointed to the drastic cuts to early childhood services, like Head Start and Pre-K Counts.

Many said as the need for social service intervention grows, the funding dries up.

When funding is lost, the first things to go are preventative programs, according to Northampton County division administrator Kevin Dolan.

Dolan's Lehigh County counterpart, Pamela Buehrle, said this year child abuse and neglect referrals are up 23 percent, and she is looking at at least a \$3.9 million cut.

Attendees at the meeting organized by the Children's Coalition of the Lehigh Valley urged residents to contact their legislators and lobby against the budget bill.

State Rep. Steve Samuelson, D-Lehigh/Northampton, who opposes the Senate bill, told residents now is the time for their advocacy.

A state study used to create the new education funding formula found the state is underfunding public education by more than \$4 billion and that poorer communities are shouldering the highest tax burdens.

Some parents asked to have the state-operated Scranton State School for the Deaf put back into Rendell's budget. The budget proposes shutting down the school to save \$7.3 million.

Parent Dana Schwenk said social agencies and residents need to realize the job of educating these 100 students is going to fall back on local school districts and taxpayers at a great cost.