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TOP STORY

Human cost of proposed budget cuts too high

Mar 15, 2017

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I work in a residential treatment program for people who have Autism Spectrum Disorder. I'm on day shift; I spend my time working directly with one young person. This one-on-one time is crucial for my client's safety, well-being, and learning. If the Montana Legislature enacts HB2, almost \$84 million will be siphoned off the Department of Public Health and Human Services budget. These cuts would paralyze the state's ability to provide essential services for seniors and people with developmental disabilities, such as my client.

I don't have the answers to our current budget crisis. But I know one thing is true — we have options. Gov. Steve Bullock has proposed alternate paths for dealing with the shortfall. The need for long-term care is only going to grow. According to the state's Aging Services division, the number of Montanans age 65 and over was more than 178,000 in 2015, and by 2025, that number will increase to 266,584 — it's a hard fact that 70 percent of them will need long-term care.

Gutting these monies would level an entire host of services — including the intensive, one-on-one therapy that has allowed my client to thrive. Read the fine print. This portion of the budget is also earmarked for respite care, nursing homes, home-delivered and group meals for senior centers, hospice and personal assistance.

What does it say about our values if we take money away from people who need care? Those who voted in favor of this proposal aren't considering its ramifications; both Republicans and Democrats oppose it. Montana State Senator Jon Sesso mentioned the importance of "the people behind the numbers." Rep. Jon Knokey called these cuts "too draconian."

Still, some lawmakers act as if helping vulnerable seniors and developmentally disabled Montanans is optional. I'm in the trenches doing direct care. The money for this type of human services work is crucial protein in the state's budget — not fat for trimming.

Beyond the one-on-one therapy, the young man I work with also requires adaptive equipment so he can communicate — he's nonverbal. He needs a special chair, one that allows him to move during school and mealtimes. (Movement decreases my client's aggression and anxiety, and makes it possible for him to focus on the task we're teaching.) These specialized supplies allow him to make huge developmental strides. If the cuts go through, it's likely the money for these necessary purchases will disappear.

This slice of the state's budget also funds my salary. Staffing levels are already inadequate. People don't want to do an emotionally and physically taxing job for so little pay. Turnover is high. When there's not enough staff, we work late. Last month I logged 96 hours in one week — that's not a sustainable schedule. But if people don't show up, I can't leave. My client doesn't stop needing care. Many employees regularly work 80 hours a week.

Most of my coworkers live paycheck to paycheck, and I'm no exception. I have no cushion. If these cuts go through, there won't be any chance for a living wage or an improved health care plan. My deductible is \$3,000 — seeing a doctor is prohibitively expensive. You need to make enough to take care of yourself or you can't care for others.

If cuts happen, vulnerable people receiving in-home care will be forced to leave their homes for a more expensive long-term care option — it makes no sense. Keeping seniors and people with disabilities in their homes costs the state less money and ensures they're happy and secure. Our state is already financially strapped — but that aside, there's also the human cost, something the number crunchers seem to have forgotten.

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