

**Mar 31, 2011**

## **Gov. Rick Scott to plans cuts to services for developmentally disabled**

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Deficit prompts Gov. Rick Scott to plan cuts to services for developmentally disabled

Gov. Scott plans to slash rates and shift funds to get agency out of \$170 million hole.

TALLAHASSEE - Due to a shockingly large deficit, Gov. Rick Scott is planning to invoke his emergency powers and make deep cuts to the rates charged by group homes and caseworkers who help the developmentally disabled.

Scott could announce a 15 percent rate cut as early as today to close the \$170 million budget gap in the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, according to lawmakers who were briefed Wednesday.

The deficit - which exceeds the agency's spending authority by nearly 20 percent - is partly the legacy of lawsuits, poor planning by the Legislature and a nearly \$20 million veto by Scott's predecessor, Charlie Crist, who starved the program of savings when he refused to trim provider rates last summer.

Those who provide services to the nearly 30,000 Floridians with cerebral palsy, autism and Down syndrome say they aren't concerned with the origin of the deficit as much as the effect of deep rate cuts.

"This would be a catastrophe," said Kingsley Ross, an advocate and lobbyist for Sunrise Community, a Miami-based group home operator.

For the past three years, Ross said, providers have shouldered rate cuts. They're now operating on the thinnest of margins.

"The system can't take this," Ross said. "Eventually, we will have to cut jobs and reduce services."

Scott's spokesman, Brian Burgess, said the governor doesn't want to harm the developmentally disabled. But, he said, the state has put off tough choices for too long and now the bill has come due.

Burgess said paring the budget now will put the state in a better position to pay future expenses on the neediest.

"Yes it's painful," Burgess said. "But we're trying to alleviate the pain long term."

Florida has a constitutional requirement for a balanced budget, but federally created Medicaid-related entitlement programs can go into deficit from time to

time if the number of recipients increases or the cost for needed services rise.

Next year, the Legislature estimates that the entire state budget will have a \$3.75 billion shortfall. So lawmakers are trimming programs.

Troubled by the deficit in the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, Scott ordered an inquiry. The results of the investigation are scheduled to be released today.

The Legislature tried to cut the program for the developmentally disabled last year. But Gov. Crist refused. He vetoed a 2.5 percent provider rate reduction, which helped lead the program in deficit.

Meantime, lawmakers didn't budget enough money for the program to account for the fact that thousands of recipients had sued to block a system of service reductions and cuts to the program.

When times were flush five years ago, legislators expanded the rolls of the Medicaid program by about 5,000 - a move that brought cheers from advocates for the disabled. They fretted that about 15,000 developmentally disabled people were on a waiting list but unable to receive services.

The waiting list has only grown. Medical costs have increased. But state tax collections plummeted and then flatlined.

Add all those factors together, and the deficit in the \$850 million program for the developmentally disabled is about \$170 million, according to the Florida House's proposed budget. The budget proposes to fix this year's deficit by shifting money from special accounts.

But the Senate offers no such solution, leaving Gov. Scott few choices. Neither he nor his fellow Republicans want to raise taxes to fill the deficit.

Scott's proposal to reduce rates by 15 percent should save about \$34 million. The rest of the deficit would be plugged by shifting agency money and reducing the rates of South Florida providers who get slightly higher reimbursements.

Sen. Joe Negron, a Stuart Republican who chairs the Senate's health budget committee, and Rep. Matt Hudson, chairman of the House health budget committee, said they were briefed on the plan and support Scott.

"The governor wants to fix a problem," Negron said. "And this deficit is a big problem."

By Marc Caputo, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

*Posted by Waiver News* 