

Testimony to the House Budget Review Subcommittee on Human Resources

February 18, 2004

Presented by Robert Elliott, Board Member
Seven Counties Services, Inc., Louisville

Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak.

I am here today as a board member of one of Kentucky's 14 community mental health and mental retardation boards...Seven Counties Services. We provide behavioral health services in Jefferson and the surrounding six counties of Bullitt, Henry, Oldham, Shelby, Spencer and Trimble.

In medicine, physicians are urged always to “**do no harm.**” This means that in providing effective treatment, a physician always must balance the overall health and well-being of the person with measures necessary to treat a specific condition. Making a decision about which measures to use in treating the immediate illness should never result in a detrimental effect on the overall condition of the patient.

Today, I am asking that in your very difficult budget deliberations around human services that you “**do no harm.**”

What this means is deciding not to accept a budget that appears to be balanced on paper, but actually results in harm to those individuals with mental illness, substance abuse disorders or mental retardation who are served by Seven Counties and the other 13 MH/MR boards across the state. The safety net of services for these individuals and their families is no longer just frayed...it has unraveled... and many are painfully falling through the holes.

For years, our community mental health centers have compassionately tried to insulate clients, family members, and employees from the effects of chronic under-funding and ongoing budget reductions. We have done this, even while trying to manage the erosion of services and programs created by more than 10-years without any cost-of-living adjustments in our state funding contracts. Our financial condition further has been worsened by freezing of Medicaid reimbursement rates and other Medicaid reductions.

Last year, Seven Counties was unable to protect its clients, family members, and staff. For the first time in its proud 25-year history, Seven Counties was forced to lay-off staff members – in this case, approximately 66 valued employees were let go and 89 jobs were lost.

Worse yet, we had to limit access to care by reducing or closing programs and prioritizing access to services. And while we tried to help individuals find other treatment providers and services in the community, we know some painfully fell through the safety net's holes. Unfortunately, their lack of care may have resulted in the joblessness, homelessness, family strife, alcoholism and other drug abuse, criminal activity, incarceration, and even suicidal attempts.

Seven Counties' predicament is but a harbinger of things to come – not only in our region – but elsewhere across the state. Several weeks ago, the state informed the mental health centers of a 2.5% cut in their General Fund allocations for the current fiscal year. **To further compound the problem, this 2.5% reduction is being carried forward in the proposed budget and has already been taken from the base for '05 and '06.** Regardless of what you have been told, you are not looking at a “continuation” or “flat-line” budget!

We know – and you know—that treatment works, and that community-based care is effective and cost-efficient. We have hundreds of “success stories” of individuals and families who have benefited from the services offered by Seven Counties and our affiliate agencies. The counties that we serve have benefited from these services as well. We applaud your recognition of this and your help with the growth of programs such as the Support for Community Living (SCL), which is helping to reduce waiting lists and to assure choice by individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.

But these and future successes are continually in jeopardy due to chronic underfunding of the safety net. Adults and children already in treatment, others attempting to access services, family members, as well as employees and their families, will feel the brunt of current and future cuts if they remain in the budget.

In closing, let me strongly urge you again to “**do no harm**” in this budget. Restore the 2.5% budget cuts to the base for the next biennium. And then appropriately trend and index funding to at least meet inflationary costs. This would begin to mend the behavioral health safety net to help maintain the necessary core services provided by Seven Counties and the other regional mental health/mental retardation centers. Please remember that this chronically under-funded system of care simply cannot tolerate further cuts!

On behalf of the Board of Seven Counties Services, our clients and their families, our staff and the communities we serve, I urge you: Prevent further harm to the overall health and welfare of your constituents, so that ALL Kentuckians reach their fullest potential.

Thank you.
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