



Driver Hank Murphy pushes Michael Arrindell into an agency van.

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Budget cuts a disaster for families of disabled

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Many New Yorkers will suffer the effects of severe cuts proposed in the state budget, but perhaps those who will suffer the most are the families of the mentally disabled.

Non-profit agencies on Staten Island received about \$1.3 million last year to provide relief service to such families. Officials from the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD) say this aid prevents families from falling apart under the strains of caring for a loved one who is disabled.

The OMRDD has been able to scrape together funds from other sources, according to the office's spokesman, Ronald Byrne. But even with that aid, more than a third of last year's Island total has simply disappeared, and earlier than care providers expected. Roughly translated, about a third of the 1,225 Island families served could be affected, Byrne said.

"I understand there's a flurry of outrage across the state," said Genevieve Benoit, executive director of the non-profit agency A Very Special Place, angry herself after discovering the nature of the cuts recently.

She said she was shocked to learn that last year's \$400,000 for her group's Telluride program, which transports more than 200 disabled people to special programs, was to be cut by nearly two-thirds.

The outrage may have pro-

voked the desired reactions in Albany, however. In the last weeks, speculation has grown that lawmakers will restore funding to family support programs.

"I've been hearing rumors that are very optimistic," Ms. Benoit said.

Concern over funding began to mount in late February, when the state notified care providers that their funding contracts would be terminated on March 31, instead of June 30. Last year the state provided \$28 million for family support; this year, the total, reflected in new contracts that took effect a week ago, will be \$14 million.

Particularly disappointing about the cuts, Ms. Benoit said, is that they threaten to disrupt a long-term plan of weaning the state's mental health care system away from large institutions, a process that began in earnest with the dismantling of Willowbrook State School.

"It's a step backward in the whole service system," Ms. Benoit said. By generously supporting families in their efforts to care for the disabled, the state can make institutions unnecessary, she said.

Byrne acknowledged that family support programs will feel cuts of "a larger proportion than the rest of the system as a whole." But he disputed the claim that the policy is inequitable.

"It's not fair to say that family support services (funding) is being hurt and no one else is," he said.

"The cuts are going to hurt. They're going to hurt everywhere."

Transportation and other services were judged to be "not quite as critically necessary" as respite care and crisis intervention, which will be the OMRDD's priorities, Byrne said. The state's goal will be to keep families intact amid the fiscal and emotional stress, he said.

Island care providers, as a group, are concerned. Their network is so tightly interwoven that even if one agency is left untouched by the budget cuts, it will feel the pinch when other agencies lose funds.

The Association for the Help of Retarded Children (AHRC), for

example, relies heavily on other agencies for transportation. It expects to feel little immediate impact on its finances, but its staff members, who already have their hands full supervising programs and driving clients in the daytime, will be sent scurrying seven nights a week to transport children to evening activities.

"The programs they go to are on other sides of the Island," said Margo Black, manager of AHRC, which has an office in Willowbrook. The agency has only one van, she said. "We'll always be on the road. It's going to be crazy."

A few agencies manage to provide all their own services and essentially operate outside the network. On Your Mark, which

serves more than 300 people, mostly school children, was informed that all of the \$80,000 it received last year for family support will be restored this year.

Still, with such extensive cuts being made all around it, even officials there are concerned.

"There is sort of a community feeling on the Island (among the care providers and clients)," said Eugene Spatz, executive director of On Your Mark. "It indirectly affects everyone."

Evidence of that bond can be found in an agreement reached by a handful of care providers to keep A Very Special Place's shuttle service alive for four weeks more than current funding allows. During those four weeks, if law-

makers have not restored funds, any losses incurred will be shared by the agency and Staten Island Aid, the Association for Children with Retarded Mental Development and possibly other agencies, Ms. Benoit said. But after four weeks, if the grants are not restored, the shuttle service will fold, she said.

Last year, the OMRDD had 31 funding contracts with Island agencies. Of those, 13 have been canceled in anticipation of a severely tightened budget, Byrne said.

Statewide, the OMRDD expects to lay off 495 people by the end of June, Byrne said, but the Staten Island office will lose only two people.