Cuts in aid for HIV drugs bring new set of troubles

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Most Ohioans dependent on government assistance to pay for their HIV medications are still getting drugs that keep them alive and lower the risk that they'll infect others.

But for many of them, cuts to the state's Ryan White Program have brought other hardships and frustrations.

And patients, advocates and doctors worry that more struggles might be on the way.

Last July, facing a $3.9 million deficit three months into the program's fiscal year, its leaders cut the number of people they serve and instituted a waiting list. They also eliminated some other assistance, including dental care and money for travel and medications not directly related to HIV.

As of last week, 390 Ohioans were on the waiting list for help with their drug costs.

Before last year's cuts, more than 4,700 clients were enrolled in the assistance program. By December, that number had dropped by almost 1,000.

The cuts - and an infusion of money several months later - have fixed the dire financial situation of last summer, said Jay Carey, management analyst for the Ryan White Program.

Carey awaits word on federal funding for the program's next fiscal year, which starts in April, and he hopes the program will fare well in state budget negotiations.

Some good news is that a recently awarded federal grant for $1.2 million will soon allow the state to bring more than 100 people off the waiting list, Carey said.

Meanwhile, the Ohio Department of Health is working to change state rules so that it can provide services only to the sickest patients. The change is expected within a few months. The department planned to institute medical criteria last year but discovered that a rule change was needed.

If changes are instituted this year, some of the clients now receiving help will be cut off from assistance, and others on the waiting list will have their drugs covered.

Johnny Williams, a 41-year-old AIDS patient who lives on the Near East Side, said that although he's grateful he still receives assistance for his essential medications, the cuts have forced him to do without antidepressants and without bus passes and help with food.

Williams said his disability income is enough to pay rent and utilities, but that's it. He relies on food banks and, for transportation, friends and help from the Columbus AIDS Task Force.

He can't afford to buy antidepressant medication.

"I've been volunteering and trying to keep myself motivated," said Williams, who wishes he was well enough to work. "I'm trying to just deal with it, but life is much harder."

Others who've lost all state assistance have mostly stayed well by applying for drug-assistance programs run by pharmaceutical companies.

Dr. John Davis, an HIV expert who has advised program leaders in the past year, said clinics and others have worked diligently to make sure patients get medicines through other sources.

"I think the drug companies have kind of stepped up to the plate here. They've said they will support people who are on (the state's) waiting list," said Davis, who directs the Ohio State University Medical Center's infectious-diseases clinic.

"But I don't know how long that is going to last."

Peggy Anderson, president of the Columbus AIDS Task Force, said she doesn't know of anyone who has stopped HIV treatment since the cuts. However, she is concerned about the loss of other services and about some people who have had to switch medications for financial reasons.

Side effects and potencies among HIV medications vary, and changing them for financial rather than clinical reasons isn't desirable, Davis said.

Davis and Anderson say they worry that national demands for assistance will become too much for the drugmakers, who are lobbying the federal government to provide the money to help more Americans with HIV.

As of Jan. 3, 6,001 people in 10 states were on waiting lists for assistance, according to the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors.

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