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Hundreds protest HIV funding cuts + video

By GINA SMITH

gsmith@thestate.com

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When Deadra Lawson-Smith moved to South Carolina for a new job in 2006, her insurance company would not cover her pricey HIV medication because it treated a pre-existing condition.

So Lawson-Smith went without her drugs for about a year, her compromised immune system struggling to fight off colds, the flu and other health threats. She ended the year in the hospital, sick with pneumonia.

Luckily, a change in her insurance coupled with an influx of state cash to South Carolina's AIDS Drug Assistance Program enabled Lawson-Smith, 47, to get back on her medication and regain her health.

But her good luck - and the luck of about 2,000 other South Carolinians living with HIV/AIDS - may not last.

The current version of the state budget for the 2010-11 fiscal year, which starts July 1, eliminates all money for the Drug Assistance Program, which provides life-saving HIV/AIDS drugs to the state's low-income, uninsured and underinsured residents.

The budget also eliminates all money for the state's HIV/AIDS prevention programs.

Without the state funding, matching money from the federal government is also in jeopardy.

The cut would mean the 2,055 people enrolled in the Drug Assistance Program would no longer get help in paying for their medication and could face dire health consequences.

South Carolina is thought to be the first state in the nation to propose the elimination of its entire HIV/AIDS budget.

"We've got to get this funding. We've got to keep fighting," said Lawson-Smith, who rallied at the State House on Wednesday with hundreds of other HIV/AIDS advocates. "I don't think the Legislature wants anyone to die. This money allows people to live, to work, to be productive."

Dwindling state revenues are wreaking havoc on the state budget, forcing cuts to many of the state's agencies and programs.

State Rep. Joe Neal, D-Richland, has proposed a budget amendment that would restore \$2.2 million in state money for the \$5.9 million ADAP drug program.

"These are difficult (budget) times. But even in the midst of that, we have to find the resources to battle this disease," Neal said, pointing to a growing body of research that shows the South is where most of the new HIV/AIDS cases are occurring.

While Neal's partial restoration helps, it's won't be enough, say HIV/AIDS advocates.

Without the full \$5.9 million being restored, some people will be dropped from ADAP and will go without their medication. And new people with HIV/AIDS, eligible for the program, will be put on a waiting list.

That waiting list could grow quickly.

In the past year, ADAP has received about 100 applications a month.

"The waiting list means people will be delayed in treatment," said Johanna Hayes, director of Horry County's Careteam, a nonprofit that advocates for people with HIV/AIDS. "Delayed treatment means they get sicker and end up in the hospital," costing taxpayers more on the back end.

South Carolina is considered by many to be a hotbed for the disease.

Per capita, the Palmetto State ranks eighth among states in the rate of new AIDS cases, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Columbia ranks ninth in its per-capita rate of AIDS cases among U.S. cities.

More than 14,000 South Carolinians have been documented as living with HIV/AIDS.

Reach Smith at (803) 771-8658.

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