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McDonnell proposes adding funds to AIDS program

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Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell is proposing to add $7.2 million to a state program that provides medicine to people with HIV and AIDS and which has already started cutting back on enrollment because it was running out of money.

The AIDS Drug Assistance Program provides medicine to people who are uninsured or under-insured and do not qualify for Medicaid. It serves more than 3,000 clients.

But the poor economy and expanded testing has led to a 21 percent increase in enrollment between 2007 and 2009, and the Virginia Department of Health has had to limit eligibility as a result.

"Monitoring of enrollment and program expenses reveals that for the first time in its 20-year history, ADAP will not be able to keep pace with the increasing demand in Virginia, paralleling a similar trend in ADAPs across the country," State Health Commissioner Karen Remley wrote to clinicians earlier this month.

Last month, the program limited new enrollment to pregnant women, minor children and patients being treated for certain infections. The program also is now limiting prescriptions to 30-day supplies or less, the Department of Health announced. And about 760 of the program's clients are being shifted to other programs, such as patient assistance programs run by drug companies.

"It's serious, but I think at the same time they're doing their absolute best to take care of everyone [affected] by the eligibility changes," said Michele Chesser, senior health policy analyst for the General Assembly's Joint Commission on Health Care.

Maureen Dempsey, the state's chief deputy for public health, said the $7.2 million in proposed funding was a "very strong show of support on the governor's part" for the program. She stressed that patients are still receiving medications; they're just leaning more on the drug company assistance programs because of increased enrollment.

Before the enrollment changes, the program faced a $2.3 million shortfall in fiscal 2011 and a $12.4 million shortfall in fiscal 2012. Much of the program's funding comes from the federal government.

The Commission on Health Care will meet Jan. 5 to receive an update on the Department of Health's plans for addressing the HIV/AIDS program shortfall.

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