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Budget cuts put AIDS assistance program in peril

By: Heidi Zhou-Castro

A program that makes HIV and AIDS medications more affordable is on the chopping block as state lawmakers try to figure out how to close the gap on a multi-billion dollar shortfall.

ADAP, or the AIDS Drug Assistance Program, allows low-income Texans to pay for HIV and AIDS medications. Currently, almost 15,000 people in the state use it.

The medications would be otherwise impossible to afford for Brandi Bodenheimer. The mother of three found out she was HIV positive when she was pregnant with her youngest.

"My babies, love my babies," Bodenheimer said. "I've had this almost 12 years. I look good because ADAP was there to help me."

Research shows the drugs can extend a person's life who is struggling with HIV or AIDS by not just a year, but decades. However, they are impossible for Bodenheimer to afford on a salary working for payday loans.

"I took three medications, which is three grand a month or more," she said.

Lawmakers are considering cutting ADAP by almost \$20 million. It's a move that advocates like Paul Scott with the AIDS Services of Austin are trying desperately to stop.

"We're looking at nearly 3,000 people that would be without medication," he said.

Thursday, the Senate Finance Committee voted to save the program from getting cut, but now the bigger battle begins on the House floor.

"People will die," Rep. Garnet Coleman said. "It's not even a question whether they will or won't, if they don't have the medication."

An amendment proposed by Coleman writes funding for the program back into the state budget.

This isn't the first time the ADAP program has faced a challenge.

In 2005, it was also defunded when the state faced a \$10 billion budget hole, but the program was eventually rescued.

Supporters say they hope the same thing happens this time around.

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