

Budget cuts called life-threatening

By Jennifer Ryan, Mesa Tribune



Hundreds of people living with HIV and AIDS statewide could lose funding for life-sustaining medications if the state Legislature's proposed budget is adopted and becomes law, said officials from the Arizona Department of Health Services.

Lawmakers plan to cut funding for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program in half, a \$500,000 reduction that could jeopardize the health of patients and the state programs that support them, said public health officials and HIV/AIDS advocacy groups.

"This is one that is really amazing they would consider cutting, given the severe side effects of the illness," said Leslie Schwalbe, the department's deputy director. "Those . . . individuals would lose pharmaceutical treatment, and it would seriously endanger their lives."

State officials said the drug assistance program is critical because it serves people who have no other means to pay for medications that can cost \$8,000 to \$15,000 a year. Many of those enrolled in the program — 780 statewide, including 136 in the East Valley are the working poor, who make too much to qualify for the state's Medicaid program but not enough to pay for the drugs or for private insurance.

"If I wasn't on the program, there would be no way I could afford the medicine," said Donald Dias of Scottsdale, who was diagnosed with AIDS in 1993. "I'd be dead by now without taking the drugs."

Lawmakers say they are in a tough position as they grapple with a \$1 billion deficit. The drug assistance program is one of many health care programs experiencing major financial reductions, and deciding which programs receive more money is difficult, said Rep. Russell Pearce, R-Mesa, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

"Our hands are tied," Pearce said. "There's only so much money we can control."

The budget cut to drug assistance is significant because the state's funding is used to qualify for federal dollars, which support a wide range of services for people living with HIV or AIDS. Without a certain level of state funding, Arizona could lose federal funds and put entire programs at risk, said Rose Conner, assistant director for public health services for Department of Health Services.

"We could be potentially jeopardizing the grant process," Conner said. "The bottom line is saving \$500,000 is going to come out someplace else because those patients are going to get sick because they can't get drugs."

As patients become sick, they will end up in hospital emergency rooms, she said. Many will be unable to work, possibly making them eligible for the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System, the state's Medicaid program — yet another program lawmakers said is straining the state budget.

State health officials said proposed cuts to the drug assistance program show how dramatically patients can be impacted by reduced public health care assistance.

Dias said that without his medications, he rapidly loses weight and develops sores.

"If they cut the program, I don't know what I'll do," he said.

Public health authorities have credited the drug cocktail — three to five medications patients began taking in combination in the late 1990s — with a dramatic drop in fatalities and increased quality of life for people living with HIV or AIDS.

Keith Thomas, who has been HIV-positive since 1985, said he was totally disabled for six years until he began taking a drug cocktail. Today, he works full time as executive director of the Phoenix Shanti Group, which provides housing, counseling, substance abuse and other services for those who are HIV-positive.

"I'm doing well, and it's because of the drugs," he said.

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