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Senate takes public testimony

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Bill Feig/The Advocate

Wendy Lindsey, left to right, Duane Ebard, representing Louisiana Citizens for Action Now (LaCAN) Region VII in Shreveport; and Charles Tubre, representing the Advocacy Center in New Orleans; during public testimony day at the state Senate Finance committee hearing.

Public pleads for state aid



BILL FEIG/The Advocate

During public testimony on the state budget Saturday in the Senate Finance Committee, Rebecca Ellis, of Covington, left to right, holds up a picture of Emma Kaufman as Nann McMullen of Monroe explains Emma's situation. At right, Matt McNeely, of Rapides Parish, waits to testify.

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<http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/Public-pleads-for-state-aid.html?showAll=y&c=y>

With her disabled son sitting nearby in a wheelchair, Pat Cranford, of West Monroe, pleaded with legislators at the State Capitol Saturday to ensure that he remains happy and independent.

Cranford said the state provides the care that she cannot afford. She said she fears her 32-year-old son will lose that care through state budget cuts.

"I really don't have a plan B. I wish I were younger ... I wish I were independently wealthy. I wish a lot of things," she told the Senate Finance Committee.

The committee set aside Saturday to hear from the public on how the state operating budget that is being crafted likely will impact the disabled, the poor and others.

Dozens of people packed the hearing room. Two other hearings rooms were opened to handle the overflow.

The testimony often was emotional as mothers, fathers, doctors, dentists and an aspiring Miss Louisiana made appeals to legislators.

Cranford said her son, Josh, was born three months early, leaving him developmentally disabled.

A disability check pays for Josh Cranford's food and rent. He relies on the state to provide the 24-hour care that he requires.

Community-based services, partially paid by state government, triggered a lot of testimony.

"Keep me in my home," Tommie Barmore told the committee, struggling to articulate the words.

Like Josh Cranford, Barmore is developmentally disabled. She lives in a West Monroe apartment with roommates. The state provides some of the funding for her care. The state is facing a \$1.6 billion shortfall in the fiscal year that starts July 1.

Gov. Bobby Jindal proposed a \$24.9 billion state operating budget that hinged on selling prisons, reshuffling tobacco settlement dollars and shrinking state employees' pay. The Louisiana House objected to those ideas and made cuts that the Jindal administration contends will devastate the state.

If the budget legislation stays in its current posture, state agency leaders claim prisons will close and those most in need of health care will suffer. House leaders counter that those are choices being made by Jindal and that the cuts could be made elsewhere with minimal impact on those attending Saturday's hearings.

The Senate Committee on Finance is reviewing House Bill 1, the budget bill, before sending it to the full Senate.

Each year, the panel sets aside a day to hear from the public on a budget that funds health care, higher education and other services.

Susie Labry, vice president of the Baton Rouge Asperger's Syndrome Meetup Group, said she is worried that a mentally ill friend will not receive the monthly shots she needs to stay out of an institution.

She said state funding for mental health services already is bare bones. "This is about the cutting back of the lean and not the fat," Labry said.

Dr. Don Donaldson, chairman of the Louisiana Dental Association's Medicaid Task Force, said many dentists are reconsidering the dental treatment they provide to the needy because of budget cuts to their payments.

He said children start out with a small amount of decay that can become much more serious if left untreated. He said most neglected dental care is found in low income citizens.

Donaldson asked the committee for a glimmer of hope.

"I don't know the budget situation in Baton Rouge," he said. "We do not need to lose dental providers."

Sister Carla Bertani with St. Mary's Residential Training School in Alexandria said the size of cuts proposed would devastate the facility for children with developmental disabilities and autism.

"What can we slice?" she asked. "We are down to the bone."