

Medicaid move may aid mental health

Expansion could free up millions in funding

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Expanding Medicaid eligibility would free up almost \$69 million for cash-strapped mental health and recovery boards across Ohio, according to Ohio Department of Mental Health estimates released Tuesday.

Gov. John Kasich proposed expanding Medicaid coverage to individuals up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level. Under the current system, local mental health and recovery boards pay for services required by individuals not covered by Medicaid or other insurance. In fiscal year 2011, these claims amounted to \$137 million for people who would be covered under the expansion.

Even if Medicaid picks up only 50 percent of those claims, which Ohio Department of Mental Health officials think is a conservative estimate, expanding the program would free almost \$69 million from state subsidies and local levies in 2014, the first year individuals would be eligible, Ohio Department of Mental Health spokeswoman Trudy Sharp said.

The Mental Health and Recovery for Licking and Knox Counties could redistribute more than \$1 million in calendar year 2014 and \$1.6 million in the biennial budget, according to estimates from the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services released Tuesday.

"By expanding Medicaid, the local communities will, over time, be able to redirect subsidies to fill other gaps in services," Sharp said.

That's good news to boards that watched about \$140 million in state aid disappear during the past decade, said Jody Demo-Hodgins, executive director of the Crawford-Marion Board of Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services. The agency received \$42,000 in state aid this year to provide mental health and addiction services to Crawford and Marion counties, she said.

“We’re fortunate to have a levy in both counties, but it’s just never going to be enough,” Demo-Hodgins said.

If the Ohio General Assembly approves the Medicaid expansion, Demo-Hodgins hopes to provide housing assistance, suicide prevention education and job training with freed-up state and local dollars; those programs are not covered under Medicaid, she said.

The expansion also means more access to mental health and addiction services for individuals. The local mental health and recovery board treated 2,000 uninsured individuals in 2011, said Kay Spergel, executive director of Mental Health and Recovery for Licking and Knox Counties.

“It’s going to allow uninsured people greater access to critical care,” Spergel said.

Rod Hollingsworth, executive director of the Muskingum Area Mental Health and Recovery Board, said he would add services for individuals released from incarceration, who are returned to Zanesville more frequently because of sentencing reform to keep prison populations down. He also would increase hours at consumer drop-in centers, which provide mental health assistance.

However, Hollingsworth said he’s wary that Ohio Department of Mental Health estimates seem a little high. He anticipates a waiting period while people sign up for Medicaid and their applications are processed.

Joe Trolan, executive director of the Richland County Mental Health and Recovery Services Board, anticipates paying for individuals without Medicaid during the first six months of 2014 while the program is ramped up. The agency can receive compensation for up to 90 days before the individual is approved for Medicaid, but approval often takes weeks, he said.

However, that doesn’t mean Trolan doesn’t have a wish list for the extra money, including additional vocational services and housing assistance.

“If all goes well, we should see about a \$720,000 increase for non-Medicaid claims, which sounds really, really good,” Trolan said.

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