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A healthy improvement; Medicaid expansion could boost treatment for addicts, mentally ill

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LORAIN — Governor John Kasich’s proposed expansion of the state’s Medicaid program could free up millions in funding for the Lorain County mental health and addiction service boards.

The funding redirection could mean new or expanded services in Lorain County, both organizations said.

That proposed expansion would provide health care to 12,883 more people in Lorain County by increasing coverage up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level.

Both boards spent a combined \$4.5 million in fiscal year 2011 covering the people who would now become eligible for Medicaid.

The new coverage could free up an estimated \$3.4 million for the county Board of Mental Health and the Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services Board in the first 18 months after the Medicaid expansion takes effect in January 2014.

That would mean a redirection of funds of roughly \$643,000 annually for ADAS and \$1.6 million annually for the mental health board once Medicaid is completely extended at the end of FY 2015.

“This is, I think, the most critical thing that has happened to the mental health and addiction services field in a couple decades,” said Tracy Plouck, director of the soon-to-be-formed Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

It is estimated that more than 50 percent of the newly eligible people are working, but do not have access to health care, either because their job does not offer it or because they cannot afford it, Plouck said.

“The ability to extend coverage in this way would be huge,” she said.

While the amounts being redirected to the local boards are not enormous, when combined with more people being covered, the change could make a huge difference, Plouck said.

Expanded addiction treatment

More than 22,000 people older than 12 years have been found to have an alcohol or drug disorder, but only 10 percent receive services in the county, said Elaine Georgas, executive director of the ADAS Board.

Lorain County has no detox facilities and few in-patient programs. The last detox facility existed in Lorain County in 1997, she said.

The Medicaid expansion could change that by both freeing up money for the ADAS board and by covering a larger population who would be eligible to have such programs covered by Medicaid, Georgas said.

“Medicaid would pay for primary treatment services for a larger number [of] clients in our community,” she said. “It would be direct funding for service providers.”

The hope is that a provider of such treatment programs would open in Lorain County as Medicaid would pay for more people to use such services, she said.

“If funding is available, more often providers would be established,” she said.

The \$643,000 freed up annually would be funneled to pay for other treatment, recovery support and prevention services not covered by Medicaid, she said.

“It is not going to pay for housing, so we need to make sure that sober housing is available,” she said. “We also need to ensure that good prevention exists in our communities.”

The ADAS board is funded by state and federal dollars, it receives no local support, Georgas has said. While Medicaid could help fix the lacking treatment options in the county, the board still needs to keep its own funding sources at the same level to maintain its service focusing on pre- and post-treatment.

If prevention, treatment and recovery support programs don’t all exist, a person is more likely to become addicted and stay addicted, she said.

“We have two messages,” she said. “Bring Medicaid in to Ohio, as well as shore up the prevention and wellness services for substance abuse.”

Refocused mental health funding

The Lorain County Board of Mental Health has lost more than \$4 million in funding in the past few budget cuts. With expanded Medicaid, services that dwindled through lower funding could get more attention.

“We’re very supportive of the governor’s proposal,” said Charlie Neff, director of the mental health board. “We are very happy he is championing the cause.”

When the board made its cuts, it prioritized services for individuals in crisis, those with severe and persistent mental illness and children and adolescents, Neff said.

“We made sure those services did not get reduced,” he said.

The need of the mentally ill is different now than it was 10 years ago, though the demand is just as high, Neff said.

“We support this on several levels,” he said. “This is going to enable these individuals to gain access to health care because they will be covered. Currently, they are probably relying on emergency rooms to get services.”

Often people who are not insured wait until their mental illness gets severe before going to an emergency room, Neff said.

“These people are being seen now, but they are seen at more expensive venues for more serious problems,” he said.

The number of treatment slots open in the county will likely increase as providers gear up to meet the new coverage, Neff said. That could mean more clinicians being hired to help the larger amount of people, he said.

With \$1.6 million freed up annually, the mental health board — which already covers people with incomes up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level — could focus on services not supported by Medicaid, such linking services to help connect people with the proper treatment.

“That frees up some money that can be used to expand some of these connecting support services in the county, which would be a good thing,” he said.

Other benefits

Before the Medicaid expansion can take place, the state legislature must approve it.

Georgas, Neff and Sheriff Phil Stammitti recently met with local legislators to gain support for the Medicaid expansion when it reaches the House of Representatives and later the state Senate.

The effects of the expansion could benefit other aspects of Lorain County’s communities.

Better access to mental health and drug addiction services could mean fewer crimes being committed in the county as a number are committed by people suffering from mental illness or addictions, Neff said.

Both the ADAS board and the mental health board work with the county jail to provide services to connect inmates with treatment following their stay. That treatment could deter future problems with the law.

Treatment, as opposed to the more costly option of incarceration, saves taxpayers money and helps the individuals, Neff said.

“It just makes sense,” he said.

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