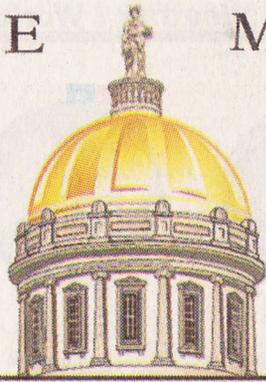


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Good Morning

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Disability services face cuts

By NEAL P. GOSWAMI
VERMONT PRESS BUREAU

MONTPELIER — The state's 16 regional developmental service agencies must submit plans to the Shumlin administration by Friday outlining how they intend to shave a total of \$2.23 million from their budgets to help cover a higher caseload expected next year.

Projections indicate that new caseloads within the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living will exceed what has been budgeted. As a result, the Developmental Services

Division asked regional agencies in late October to identify areas where money can be saved to help cover the cost of new cases. Each regional agency was given a specific target, according to Division Director Camille George.

The division customizes care based on an individual's need and circumstances to more than 3,000 Vermonters living with a developmental disability.

Advocates say the agencies the state contracts with have already absorbed several cuts in the past five years and further cuts to those already

receiving services will require scaling back even more hours and services.

Karen Schwartz, director of the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council, said the agencies faced two cuts in the 2009 fiscal year that were part of widespread rescissions across state government. Additional cuts were made in the 2011 and 2012 fiscal years as part of the "Challenges for Change" initiative.

Last year saw a similar situation where new

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Cuts

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caseloads outgrew the budget, according to Schwartz.

"There was going to be a rescission but there was a lot of advocacy last fall and money was put into the budget adjustment," she said.

That isn't happening this year, George said.

"That was a decision by the administration," she said. "We're expected to

that's appropriated."

Secretary of Administration Jeb Spaulding said the state budget has actually provided 6 percent funding increases in each of the last two years. The current fiscal year appropriation jumped more than \$9 million to \$159.5 million, he said.

"From my vantage point there was no rescission here," Spaulding said. "They have known what the appropriation level has been since last May."

Spaulding said both the

administration and lawmakers were clear that the funding included in the budget would need to fund existing cases and new ones.

"The caseload is growing and the Legislature and the governor knew the caseload was growing and said we need to find ways through administrative savings or infrastructure savings," he said.

The current state budget called for a summer study group to find savings in how services are delivered. Schwartz said the group

met at least four times but was unable to find any immediate savings.

"They came up with a list of possible reforms and possible things in the future that could save money, but the conclusion of the group was there was nothing ... that could be implemented right away," she said.

George's Oct. 31 letter to the agencies outlining the need for cuts suggested that agencies first look at ways to cut administrative costs before scaling back services.

It can happen, at least in part, through some administrative savings. It could be a potential reduction in hours, or a potential change in rates," she said.

Some of the regional agencies will have to scale back services, according to Schwartz. She said the agencies are not all on an equal financial footing so cuts will not be applied evenly.

"What we're hearing is that some agencies can absorb some of the roll-back and others can't. So,

it's going to depend on where you live in the state and whether your regional agency has resources. It's going to be uneven," she said.

Schwartz said she fears the cuts will result in a return to "day services," which are cheaper, but do not allow people to integrate as much into their communities. It would mean "a return to a more institutional way of doing services because it brings people together segregated from the community," she said.