

Greenville health provider fears General Assembly budget cuts



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GREENVILLE, N.C. (WITN) - The North Carolina General Assembly is over ten weeks late on producing a fiscal year budget.

For community health providers like Trillium Health Resources in Greenville, this delay does not instill confidence of an abundance of state-funded services.

In fact, Trillium leaders are dealing with a potential budget cut of over \$5 million for this year. They will need to dial back expenditures by October 1st, which is less than 3 weeks away.

Trillium provides mental health, developmental disability, and substance abuse services for several counties across Eastern North Carolina. Many of its patients rely on state funding to receive their therapies, medications, and other services.

Trillium has floated the offset of funding for over two years now. It tapped into more than \$13 million of its savings between July 2019 and June 2020.

This past year, Trillium spent \$4 million more than it was given.

The service can no longer operate off of its savings.

“This is about taking care of North Carolinians, right?” asked Trillium executive Cindy Ehlers.

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“It’s about taking care of people and without that expansion, we’re not taking care of our people. If we’re focused on people, Medicaid expansion is a no-brainer. But we’re not focused on people, we’re focused on politics and the people are the ones that suffer.”

Cindy Ehlers, executive vice president chief of strategy and innovation at Trillium

She says that these politically-fueled budget decisions will have serious effects on actual lives in the community. In her 25 years of providing service, she has never seen a worse time to sustain another budget cut without any kind of expansion.

Ehlers said the COVID-19 pandemic has left so many with feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation which fuels a rise in mental health crises and substance abuse.

“We have the highest rates of suicide we’ve ever had right now. This pandemic has caused more people to have anxiety and depression than we’ve ever seen and a lot more substance use, whether it’s alcohol or opioids. I have zero confidence that this will turn around.”

Cindy Ehlers, executive vice president chief of strategy and innovation at Trillium

For Jaac and Jill Afterschool Program Owner Christie Leary, the effects of budget cuts will be felt firsthand.

“If those kids are not able to get services, then they come to us not knowing how to handle the depression because they didn’t get to see their therapist today,” said Leary.

When asked what she would say to the North Carolina General Assembly that is deciding on this budget, Leary responded, “Step out of your position and into normalcy as a regular parent with children who need these services and decide from that standpoint.”

Trillium Health Resources has reached out to its stakeholders for guidance on how to manage this funding cut. Trillium and its leaders want the community to know that they hear their frustrations and wish there was something else they could do.

Anyone experiencing a crisis should call 911 immediately to receive the help they deserve.

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