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Funding cuts

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"I talk with a lot of older adults whose children are just so thankful that this service is provided," Szembrot said.

Just Friends may survive the coming reduction in services offered by Catholic Family Center, which operates it. However, CFC's Dewey Avenue senior center, which Szembrot also serves as program manager, probably won't survive the slated cuts. CFC has decided to focus on saving Just Friends because it serves a population with lower incomes than the Dewey Avenue center, Szembrot said. Nonetheless, the demise of either center will be a tragedy for the community, she added, noting that about 200 seniors visit each center each week.

"If these people have this taken away from them, they will sit at home and stare at the walls and, ultimately, that will lead to their demise," Szembrot said.

Gaps and grief

Hill is one of thousands of people served by various private social-service agencies in Monroe County who are wondering what the future holds for them. In August, Monroe County Executive Jack Doyle announced that the county government had to close a spending gap of as much as \$23 million this year, and deal with a projected \$65 million shortfall in needed revenues next year. The county executive has also stressed that he will not raise property taxes to close the gaps.

Doyle's proposed cuts, which range from closing parks on weekdays to cutting various health services, have created a storm of debate in Monroe County, with demonstrations in opposition to them taking place outside the legislature building and heated hearings about the cuts inside. A recently appointed legislative commission is currently studying the budget crisis and is slated to issue a report by month's end. Regardless of one's position on the cuts, it seems clear that the county's human service agencies, including Catholic Family Center, will soon be unable to offer as many services as they have done over the past several years.

According to a study by the Center for Governmental Research, around 25,000 people will be affected by proposed spending cuts to 73 human-service agencies, including CFC. CGR stressed that the survey was not scientific, and that it did not attempt to independently quantify or validate the data. The survey indicated that 64 percent of the agencies that participated in the study said they will be greatly affected by the budget cuts.

Between the end of this year and next, changes in Monroe County policies may



Just Friends Senior Center attendees Bill Columbo and Edna Pille enjoy ice cream and conversation during a Sept. 20 visit to Baskin Robbins in Webster.

result in the loss of as much as \$900,000 in funding to Catholic Family Center next year. This translates into about 5 percent of the agency's overall budget, according to Carolyn Portanova, executive director. Among the services likely to be cut, or to suffer funding reductions, are:

- CFC's Elder Counseling program, which serves seniors 60 and older and their caregivers. The counseling program annually serves more than 200 elderly people and their caregivers, primarily family members, and also serves an additional 600 seniors through educational presentations and mental-wellness programs.

"Clearly this service would cost more if provided in a mental-health clinic," CFC stated in a report on the cuts. "Loss of these funds may also result in (loss of) matching funds from the United Way."

- Outbacks-in-residential programs and homeless shelters. CFC may either close one of its six residential facilities, or reduce the level of care at its residential-treatment programs. Proposed funding reductions amount to almost half a million dollars, and may also result in a loss of matching funds from the state government.

CFC's report maintained that these programs prevent individuals from giving birth to drug-addicted babies, reduce the likelihood of homeless people returning to the streets, and cut down on the possibility that clients would turn to crime and wind up incarcerated. For example, Liberty Manor, a residential substance-abuse program, helped a dozen women get off drugs in the past year, Portanova said.

- Staffing cuts in preventive services. CFC faces almost a quarter-million dollars in funding cuts for programs de-

signed to help parents overcome such problems as drug addiction and child abuse that could lead authorities to place their children in foster care. The cuts come even as belt-tightening over the last few years has caused CFC staff to forego attending national conferences related to their profession and to decrease training efforts. Staff positions are next on the chopping block, officials said.

"There's not any fluff," said Nan Pokalsky, supervisor of sex-abuse treatment.

Ounce or pound

A recurring theme among CFC officials regarding the proposed cuts centered on their belief that their services "are all preventive," in the words of Portanova. By slashing funding, the county is saving its ounce of outlay now, but will have to provide a pound of funding in the future, they emphasized.

For example, officials with CFC's Children and Family Services said the per-child cost of such services pales in comparison to the cost of placing children in foster-care homes or foster-care facilities. It may cost as much as \$20,000 to place a child in foster care, whereas \$2,500 in preventive services could help a child remain with his or her family. Pokalsky added that such preventive services also save taxpayers money in the future.

"If children's needs aren't met when they're children, they grow up to be dysfunctional adults, and dysfunctional adults are the ones who wind up in prisons, mental hospitals and on the welfare rolls," she said.

That's an argument being offered by

United Way of Greater Rochester, which commissioned the Center for Governmental Research study of the county's budget cuts. Joining with such agencies as CFC, United Way recently issued a statement warning that cutbacks in human services may mean more unemployment; more unhealthy births, leading to more foster-care placement and increased Medicaid costs; more seniors relying on Medicaid as their health deteriorates due to a lack of programs to keep them healthy; and an overall decline in Monroe County's quality of life.

The United Way also cited several studies concluding that prevention saves taxpayers money. For example, a California study found that every dollar spent on prevention programs with young people saved \$1.40 in potential juvenile justice and law enforcement costs. A Pennsylvania study found that emphasizing prevention is cost-effective to local governments even if prevention reduces negative outcomes with clients by as little as 5 percent.

Lobbying legislators

Portanova said CFC has joined with other human-service agencies to press their case about the budget with elected officials. For example, a coalition of women's and children's shelter providers, including CFC, plan to rally at the county office building in downtown Rochester Oct. 1. Clients of CFC services have also testified at public hearings before the legislature, she said.

In some ways, the county budget crisis may serve as a painful but valuable training exercise for any future state and federal budget cuts coming down the pike, she added. Indeed, officials with other diocesan Catholic Charities agencies in Livingston County and the Finger Lakes noted they are waiting to see what kind of potential funding cuts may be found in next year's state budget. And then there's the fact that the U.S. Congress has yet to pass a welfare bill, even though the current legislation is set to expire next month. Catholic Charities programs serve numerous people who were affected, for better or worse, by the last welfare bill passed in 1997.

Meanwhile, Portanova said, CFC plans to work with other agencies on sharing resources in the future. For example, she said, CFC has a number of staff members who could train workers at other agencies. CFC may also wind up sharing space in its new facility with other groups, she added.

"Collaboration has been a buzzword here in the human-services area," Portanova said. "I think this is just pushing us harder and faster."

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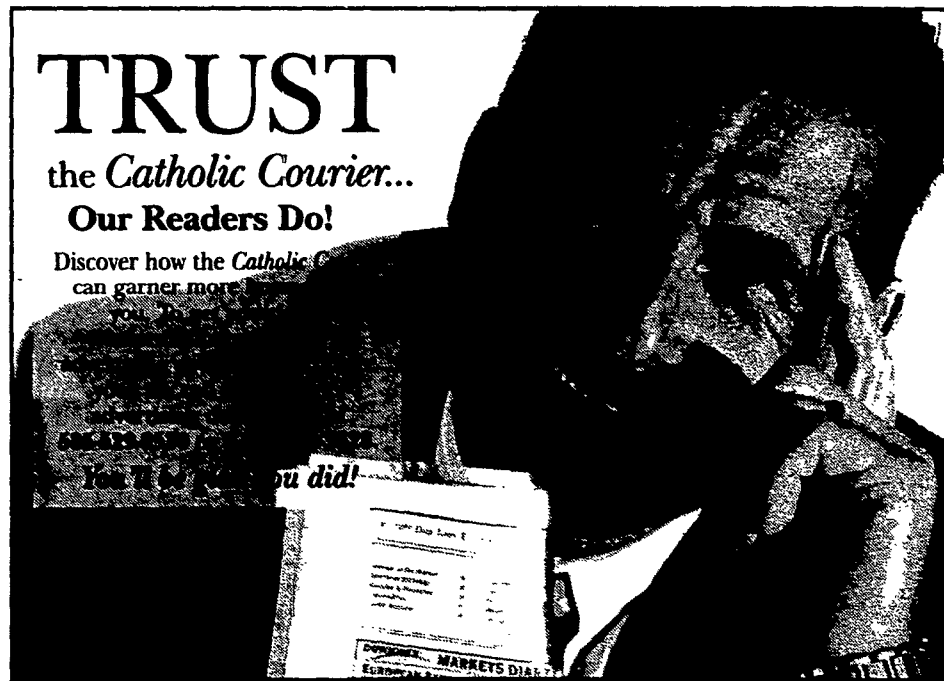
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