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More kids with autism, less money to help them

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An explosion of childhood autism and a shrinking state budget could be setting up the San Joaquin Valley for a health care crisis when those children grow up.

The reason: If young autism patients don't get the help they need, they'll just need more help — and costlier help — later in life.

And it looks as if thousands of children might fall through the cracks under proposals on the table in Sacramento, health experts say.

Across the valley and statewide, special schools and programs that serve children with autism received 3 percent less in state funds to operate this year, and proposed state budget cuts could make matters worse.

The Department of Developmental Services must make \$234 million more in cuts to help make up for a \$24.3 billion state budget shortfall.

The Central Valley Autism Project in Modesto receives half of its funding from the state Department of Developmental Services and half from the public education system. The private school could lose 10 percent of its Developmental Services funding, and its owner is hoping that none of its education funding disappears.

"Everybody is being hit in some way or another. We are just one of the many," said Mila Amerine Dickens, owner of the for-profit school. "We are just doing whatever we can do to stay open to continue to treat the kids."

Unlike nonprofit agencies that serve children with autism, the Central Valley Autism Project can't engage in fund-raising to make up the losses. More than 100 children, 18 months to 10 years old, receive services from the school.

Under proposed changes in eligibility and other state budget-tightening policies, as many as one of five toddlers who need services could be turned away, agency directors said.

The state says that children with the most severe form of autism will continue to receive care, but budget cuts will mean fewer infants and toddlers will be served.

Of all the developmental disorders, those labeled as autism are increasing the fastest statewide. No one is sure why — a combination of genes and environmental factors could be at play — but the consensus is the upward trend will continue.

Statewide the number of autism cases has grown faster than the combined number of cases of mental retardation, epilepsy and cerebral palsy. Autism increased more than 1,100 percent in two decades, while the number of people with developmental disabilities increased 136 percent, according to a report made public this year by the California Department of Developmental Services.

Early intervention programs are designed to assist young children with autism, who often need speech, occupational and physical therapy as well as intensive behavioral services. The earlier the children get the therapy, the better, experts say.

Ongoing treatment

Early therapy can help avoid expensive out-of-home care later, the experts say. The costs for service increase as children age into adulthood.

Autistic adults often need help to live independently and rely on such programs as adult day care, where they can continue learning the skills of daily living. Services for an autistic person cost at least double those for individuals with other developmental disabilities, state experts say.

At the Central Valley Autism Project, the one-on-one behavioral therapy may be started with children who are younger than 2. It's designed to help them catch up with learning skills so they can be in regular classrooms when they start school.

About half of children attending the school become fully included in regular education, Dickens said.

"We know it is beneficial," she said. "We know it is working."

Californians with developmental disabilities are entitled to services under the 1969 Lanterman Act, which gives them the right to services that help them to live more independent lives.

Before the law, many people with developmental disabilities were institutionalized, said Nancy Lundgren, a spokeswoman with the Department of Developmental Services.

The state charges parents for some services. For example, it requires financially able families to participate in sharing the cost of respite, day care and camping provided to their child.

No one turned away, for now

No qualified children are being turned away for service, said Central Valley Regional Center officials, who administer services for the developmentally disabled in the valley.

But they acknowledge that agencies that provide services are feeling a pinch.

"Our big worry is what's going to happen in the next few weeks," said Robert Riddick, executive director of the regional center, which administers services in Merced, Fresno and four other valley counties.

An estimated 500 autistic children receive services through the Valley Mountain Regional Center, an agency that distributes funding to programs in San Joaquin, Stanislaus and three other counties.

Because of an antiquated state computer system, the center is unable to count the number of autistic children who receive services, said Dick Jacobs, executive director of the center. He just knows the numbers have been growing.

"My sense is that for children who appear at less risk than other youngsters, they may end up with reduced services," Jacobs said of the proposed budget cuts.

"It is difficult to tease out whether any of these program changes are going to save money over time."

Modesto Bee staff writer Ken Carlson contributed to this report.

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