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Avita cuts 37 jobs

Mental health nonprofit facing budget shortfall

A regional nonprofit that serves those with mental illness and developmental diseases won't have to close any offices in the 13-county area it serves to deal with the latest round of state budget cuts.

That may have to change if more budget cuts come, said the non-profit's chief executive officer.

"The last thing I want to do with these budget cuts is reduce the physical facilities we have in these counties," Joe Rutherford said. "We were able to accommodate these current reductions without reducing either the office hours or the office locations. There's not a guarantee that that won't happen in the future with additional cuts."

Avita provides a range of services from behavioral health care such as counseling for families and teenagers dealing with mental health issues to services for people with mental and physical handicaps, including autism. It also operates a detoxification center in Hall County.

Avita is dealing with \$3.6 million in budget cuts by reducing staff by 37 positions throughout the 13 counties. The Ambulatory Detoxification center in Hall County will no longer operate 24 hours; hours will be cut to one 12-hour shift. Hours will not be reduced at any other Avita facility at this time, he said.

"None of these decisions were made lightly," Rutherford said. "To be sure, the (fiscal year) 2010 budget reductions will require us to be more austere in our planning, but it is precisely these plans that must guide us through the months and years ahead."

While some of the staff reductions were administrative positions, about 24 to 25 of the positions eliminated were clinical providers, Rutherford said.

Avita aims to avoid cutting any other services by looking for ways to increase efficiency through the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare's Access and Engagement Initiative. Rutherford said the organization has seen results in the four months it has been involved in the program, including reducing the wait time between initial interview and the provision of services. Many times people are able to get service the same day instead of the two to three weeks it used to take.

"We've been making great strides in the right direction, but we've been subject to these tremendous cuts," Rutherford said. "I really think the impetus is on all of us who are providing these services to increase our efficiencies as much as possible and beyond that increase sources of revenue beyond state funding and Medicaid billings."

Avita gets 58 percent of its funding from the state of Georgia, which has cut the organization's funds more than \$3.6 million in the past nine months, a 24 percent decrease in funding from the 2009 contract year to the start of the 2010 contract year. The program most affected by the budget cuts is mental retardation and developmental disabilities — \$1.9 million of the \$3.6 million reduction has impacted services, delivery and clinical staff for this program, he said.

"One of our strategic goals is to reduce our dependency on state dollars by developing new sources of revenue," he said. "In Northeast Georgia, as anywhere else in the nation, there is a huge need for providing behavioral health care services."

Rutherford said he feels the cuts have been a little more severe for the agencies and organizations that provide care for Georgians with developmental disabilities.

"...I'm not sure that we've not been taking more of the cuts. I understand that we have to have our fair share of the cuts," he said explaining that the Georgia Association of Community Service Boards Inc. has tracked the amount of budget cuts handed to those agencies providing public disability services. "I'm not seeing any other service that has to take a 52

percent reduction in funding."

Avita also gets reimbursement for services from Medicaid and Medicare. A small portion of revenue comes from those with third-party insurance or who pay their own fees. Because of Avita's status as a non-profit organization, clients are charged fees on a sliding scale based on income; the typical Avita client usually ends up paying no fees, Rutherford said.

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