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## In My View: We must take care of those most in need

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By **JAN GAMBACH**

**THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER**

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We all know that our state's budget is in trouble, but a hidden crisis is occurring in mental health funding and our most vulnerable neighbors are at risk.

Nationwide, states have opted for record-setting decreases in mental health budgets — a combined total of nearly \$2.2 billion, according to the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors.

And Illinois is setting the pace. In the last two years, Illinois cut \$113 million from its mental health budget — the fourth highest in the nation, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. And state legislators will be addressing the fiscal 2012 budget in the coming weeks with deeper cuts proposed.

Community providers have endured successive years of budget reductions, extensive payment delays and increasing bureaucratic demands from the state. This has resulted in the decimation of community mental health services.

To make matters worse, Gov. Pat Quinn's proposed budget for fiscal 2012 includes steep cuts to community programs that serve 91 percent of individuals currently receiving mental illness services — while increasing funding for institutional settings. The proposed budget fails to address the governor's stated goals of system rebalancing, promoting home and community-based services and prioritizing the efficient use of resources.

In Illinois, the price we pay for state mental health cuts are not merely appropriation lines on a ledger sheet but are measured in real human impact. Tens of thousands of adults in Illinois living with serious mental illness are cut off from life-saving community mental health services as well as access to physicians, medication and housing.

At Mental Health Centers of Central Illinois, we serve more than 9,000 children, adolescents and adults in a six-county area. Since last July, we have experienced a 17 percent reduction in the number of people that we have been able to serve — more than 1,500 people — and a loss of 25 percent of hours of service to our communities.

Communities pay a high price for cuts of this magnitude. Rather than saving money for the state and local communities, these cuts to services simply shift financial responsibility to emergency rooms, community hospitals, law enforcement agencies, correctional facilities and homeless shelters. They also have a negative economic impact as not-for-profit organizations like MHCCI are able to employ fewer people.

We know health-care dollars are precious, and so we work to apply them in ways that build and strengthen our community's safety net for those who are often least able to fend for themselves. With appropriate services, people living with serious mental illness can and do achieve recovery and independence in their lives.

One crucial key to ensuring wellness and recovery is by providing high-quality, evidence-based treatment. MHCCI is playing an important role in this effort as one of 10 community behavioral health organizations nationwide selected by the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare to participate in its "Advancing Standards of Care for People with Schizophrenia" pilot program.

This program is designed to improve the daily functioning of people with schizophrenia. At the end of the day, we expect this progress to translate into greater independence and recovery for the individual — and ultimately a reduced dependence on state-funded programs and other areas of our health care system as well as increased safety for our community.

With mental health issues impacting one out of every four families in central Illinois, it is imperative that our state lawmakers establish priorities that make clear that we can and will afford to care for those in most need.

*Jan Gambach is president of Mental Health Centers of Central Illinois and system administrator for behavioral health for Memorial Health System.*

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