

Federal cuts would carve in to Fairfield County food pantry, other services



Written by

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LANCASTER -- One of the cuts presented in President Barack Obama's proposed budget released Monday could directly affect programs in Fairfield County.

One of the proposed cuts includes a 50 percent reduction of Community Services Block Grants, which provided about \$183,000 in 2010 to Lancaster Fairfield Community Action Agency.

The repercussions will be felt almost immediately in Fairfield County if the cuts are passed as proposed, said Mike Kiger, Community Action board member and Fairfield County commissioner.

The Community Services Block Grant has been used to develop and implement agency initiatives for housing development, adult basic education, financial literacy, a food pantry, an emergency shelter for homeless families and a recycling center.

"For a relatively small federal outlay, CSBG-funded programs pay off many times over as they create opportunities for all members of our community," said Michael Oatney, Community Action's board of directors president.

"Community Action uses CSBG funds to stabilize and strengthen our most vulnerable families. The ripple effect of losing CSBG will be far-reaching because the impact of these programs is so deep and so strong."

During the Great Recession, the local community action agency used the injection of CSBG funds to be able to respond to increasing demand at the local United Way sponsored food pantry. The agency served more than 16,000 Fairfield County residents during 2010.

Grace Phillips, of Bremen, uses the food pantry when she can to help supplement her Social Security income.

"If there weren't any pantries, I'd be eating

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pretty slim at the end of the month," Phillips said.

Shealisa McClaskey, of Lancaster, said her husband is not working and, with their children, the food pantry provides them with food at the end of each month.

"For the elderly on Social Security and families like mine there are not a lot places to go," McClaskey said. "There will be a lot of elderly and children in the community going hungry if this pantry closes."

Using CSBG funds to plan in 2006, the agency built and opened a larger, modern recycling facility serving all of Fairfield County.

By expanding services, the new facility staff has more than doubled, providing new local jobs. The grants helped establish the agency as an Ohio Benefit Bank site, which provides efficient online services to local residents, including financial literacy, budgeting and free tax filing assistance.

During the past 10 years, CSBG funds have been used to sustain an Adult Basic Education site for local young adults who did not complete high school in a traditional setting.

James Kramer, a January graduate from the Adult Basic Education program, said it had given him a new start on life.

"I didn't graduate from high school and went right to work," Kramer said. "Then I lost my job and heard about this program."

He spent three months in it to earn his GED.

"Now I'm enrolled in Ohio University in industrial maintenance technology," Kramer said. "This has given me a second opportunity at life."

Kiger said the importance of the funding was critical to these programs.

"CSBG helps meet the emergency needs of many local families, and allows them to return to self-sufficiency by filling the gaps left by sudden occurrences of unemployment or illness of family members," Kiger said. "Our local Community Action Agency effectively utilizes CSBG funds to leverage literally millions of dollars each year to develop and deliver programs that benefit all of our local residents."

The Obama budget plan, which is certain to be changed by Congress, would spend \$3.73 trillion in the 2012 budget year, which begins Oct. 1, a reduction of 2.4

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percent from what Obama projects will be spent in the current budget year.

Of the \$1.1 trillion in deficit savings that Obama is projecting over the next 10 years, two-thirds would come from spending cuts, including \$400 billion in savings from a five-year freeze on domestic programs that account for one-tenth of the budget.

The other one-third of deficit savings would come from tax increases such as limiting the tax deductions taken by high income taxpayers, a proposal that Obama put forward last year only to have it rejected by Congress. Obama also proposes raising taxes on energy companies.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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Grace Phillips, of Bremen, says, "If there weren't any pantries, I'd be eating pretty slim at the end of the month." / Rob Hardin, Eagle-Gazette

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