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News

PICCA braces for cutbacks

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FOR THE HERALD

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If a proposed White House budget is successful in cutting half of community service block grant funds (CSBG), residents of Pickaway County could stand to lose nearly \$100,000 in funding for local services.

President Barack Obama released his spending plan on Feb. 14, and local officials are painting a grim picture of how they can serve county residents with such a steep funding cutback.

In a news release, Pickaway County Commissioner Jay Wippel, who also sits on the Pickaway County Community Action Agency's (PICCA) board of directors, said, "The service agencies in our county have very strong collaborations, and they partner extremely well to stretch their resources and funding." We don't want our most vulnerable populations to become even more unstable during these hard times."

"First and foremost, PICCA provides vital services to Pickaway County's most vulnerable populations, especially now during these times of economic hardship," stated Melissa Benson, who is president of the PICCA board of directors. "There is an increased demand for services, and full funding becomes even more important."

Last year, PICCA received \$199,760 in CSBG funding last year.

If that reduced budget is approved by Congress, PICCA Executive Director Dave Hannahs said a significant amount of local programs and staff positions would disappear quickly.

"Looking at a worse-case scenario, we are coming up with a 'straw budget' to determine the extent of cutbacks we might have to make," he noted. "One of our programs - the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) - is federally funded. So if it comes down to a partial or complete elimination of HEAP, that loss definitely would be problematic."

Hannahs said, "The key is that we have a flexible funding stream, and that money stays local."

A cut in PICCA funding from federal sources would also mean a potentially equal reduction of matching dollars from such local organizations as the United Way of Pickaway County.

The Free Tax Clinic and the Toys for Tots programs at PICCA is partially funded by county United Way allocations, but block grant cutbacks would severely

threaten the future of those outreaches.

"Our funding is used as match dollars when PICCA is applying for grants to sustain its programs," said Michele Lanham, executive director of the county's United Way program. "The United Way cannot support the entire budget of these two programs. So without the CSBG funds, these programs are in jeopardy."

A total of 539 households were served by the Free Tax Clinic last year by providing tax preparation at no cost. Those services netted tax refunds for clients totaling \$656,524.

Toys for Tots assisted 467 low-income families by providing 1,001 children with toys during the 2010 Christmas season.

"(We have a responsibility to provide transportation for Medicaid individuals to get to their medical appointments," said Rojanne Woodward, director of Pickaway County Job and Family Services. "We have been able to do this by contracting with PICCA to provide transportation services. Without PICCA, we would be hard-pressed to find reliable transportation for these individuals."

PICCA's transportation program assists 525 low-income families in meeting their everyday needs by transporting them to and from hospitals, doctors and dentists, grocery stores and retail establishments.

One of PICCA's clients, Chattie Blaugh, has nothing but praise for how the agency has been supportive.

"They put a roof over my head, I ride PICCA transportation every day, they helped me get a job so I can put food on my table and they did my taxes for free so I could keep all of my refund," she noted. "These people are a blessing."

Steve Gary, a former PICCA board member, added, "I have never seen any organization that touches so many people to help them improve their lives. I hope they don't get cut so much that it curtails the services they provide. PICCA is a very viable institution and greatly needed in this community."

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