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Faith, service groups decry funding cuts affecting Michigan's poor

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

Lansing -- Services for the poor would be decimated under cuts proposed to close Michigan's \$1.8 billion budget hole, according to more than two dozen groups who today asked Lansing lawmakers to protect vulnerable people from shouldering the state's economic woes.

The coalition of faith-based and human services organizations -- from the Food Bank Council of Michigan to the Association of United Ways and the Michigan Catholic Conference -- said disproportionate cuts to the state departments of Human Services and Community Health would obliterate the social safety net at a time when unemployment in the state has spiked to 15.2 percent.

"We're looking at a safety net that has been ravaged by past cuts and stagnation," said Michigan League for Human Services President and CEO Sharon Parks. "That should not be happening at a time when unemployment is increasing."

Under budgets passed in the Senate, general fund support for the state Department of Human Services would be reduced by 29.4 percent, Parks said. Department of Community Health funding for programs that serve low-income people would be slashed by 24.5 percent.

The proposed cuts would include:

- A \$10 per person per month cut to family assistance, cutting the maximum grant for a family of three to \$462 per month, meaning a family with no other income would be living at 72 percent below the federal poverty line.
- The children's clothing allowance would be cut from \$88 per year to \$43.
- Funding for child care assistance for the working poor would be reduced by \$80 million.
- Supplemental Security Income for elderly and the disabled would be cut by \$14 per month.

The cuts passed by the state Senate are more drastic than those proposed by Gov. Jennifer Granholm. The state House hopes to use federal recovery cash to avoid cutting such programs. Senate Republicans say Michigan has spent itself into the hole over the past eight

years, and must finally hold the line on spending.

Jack Kresnak, president and CEO of the child advocacy group Michigan's Children, said Michigan will end up paying more in the long run if children don't have support for dealing with poverty and social problems they face.

"Programs that help vulnerable children are a wise investment because they are low cost compared to foster care or incarceration," Kresnak said.

It's up to legislators to figure out how to pay for the programs, said Paul Long, vice president for public policy with the Michigan Catholic Conference. But adopting a graduated income tax, providing unemployment benefits to unemployed workers, decreasing tax credits to the film or battery industry, or raising taxes on beer or cigarettes are among options under consideration.

"The notion that shared pain should shred the social safety net is not an option," Long said. "It's incumbent on the Legislature to figure these questions out."

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