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Social services take \$5.7M hit

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The Lower Hudson Valley will have to do without \$5.7 million in human services funds from Albany as Gov. David Paterson withholds the cash to deal with the state's lingering budget crisis.

The money, earmarked for child welfare and other social services, is part of \$750 million Paterson is holding back to deal with what he said was a \$1 billion shortfall for the state this month.

That includes \$76 million in cuts to human services statewide, with Westchester, Rockland and Putnam counties seeing local cuts.

State officials said Westchester alone would have nearly \$4.7 million withheld. That money, county officials said, largely funds child welfare services.

Rockland stands to have \$834,000 held back. County Executive C. Scott Vanderhoef said the money pays for child welfare services, providing everything from health care to day care.

Vanderhoef said the cuts account for about 2 percent of the \$10 million Rockland gets from the state each month to cover the costs of state-mandated programs.

"We literally are not spending money we absolutely don't have to," he said. "All brakes are on so we can get through to March."

For Putnam, the \$187,000 being withheld is money allotted for the county's Child Protective Services and its preventive services.

Deputy County Executive John Tully said the money was a routine advance from the state meant to cover various costs and keep the county from spending its funds and getting reimbursed later.

"Unless this becomes a reduction in state aid, it won't adversely affect the programs," Tully said.

But just how the loss in funds may affect day-to-day services remains largely unclear — Paterson made the announcement Sunday, and local officials are still scrambling to determine the full impact.

"Obviously, it will affect us in the fourth quarter, but we don't really know what that's going to be yet because all the bills are not in yet," said Victoria Hochman, a spokeswoman for Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano.

"In terms of the cash flow, that's still being evaluated," she said. "Obviously, it's not a good thing."

One agency that could feel the pinch is The Children's Village, which receives funding through Westchester County for a shelter for runaway and homeless children, and a number of preventive programs in the community.

"It's guaranteed to impact us," said Jeremy Kohomban, president and CEO of the Dobbs Ferry-based agency. "It's guaranteed to hurt kids and families."

"I can tell you whenever Albany makes these kinds of unilateral cuts that impact the local government, it impacts children and families in the community," Kohomban said Tuesday. "No question about it. And especially now at a time when our local communities are struggling with the very same problems that Albany is struggling with, which is tax revenue."

The governor's state budget measure also comes at a time when many nonprofit agencies are struggling financially, with cutbacks in public funds coupled with a drop in private contributions.

"Most not-for-profits are as far out on their credit line as they can be and are really making it payment by payment," said Paul Anderson Winchell, executive director of the Grace Church Community Center in White Plains.

"We are all so dependent on a certain level of nongovernmental private fundraising, and that is down across-the-board, whether it's grants or corporate giving or individual giving," Winchell said. "It hasn't totally dried up, and people are still trying individually to be generous. But it certainly has had an impact on all of us."

The state Association of Counties had lobbied the governor to make cuts to individual programs instead of across-the-board, said Rockland's Vanderhoef, who sits on the association's executive board.

The state is supposed to cough up the aid in January, but in the meantime, the county will need to address a cash-flow issue, he said.

"Between stimulus money we received and managing our expenses well, we think we can get through this," Vanderhoef said.

Earlier this year, federal stimulus money helped avert similar cuts. This time, officials said, there's not likely to be such a safety net.

"It's kind of that time of crisis where you will see what people are really made of," said Cora Greenberg, executive director of the Westchester Children's Association in White Plains. "When push comes to shove, what are they willing to risk politically, and what are communities willing to risk financially in order to help secure the future by making sure kids have a fair start."
