

Parents, advocates rally against day-care cuts

WHITE PLAINS — If Holly Wesley loses a valued day care help, she's not exactly sure where she or her 1-year-old will end up.

"I need this subsidy to work. If it's dropped, I'm in trouble," said Wesley, who feared that she wouldn't be eligible for unemployment or social services if she quit her job because she couldn't afford day care. "It's setting us up for failure. It's putting women and families on the streets."

The Ossining single mother who receives a Title XX subsidy, which helps her pay for much of the roughly \$1,200 monthly day care cost, was among hundreds of people who rallied Thursday outside the Westchester County office building against County Executive Rob Astorino's proposed cuts to day care and social services.

Holding signs and chanting "Two-Four-Six-Eight, Our Children Can't Wait," parents and child care advocates shared stories and spoke of the importance of programs they utilize. Those changes, many said, threaten a safety net, jeopardize families and may end up costing taxpayers more in the long run. But these cuts are mostly causing unease and uncertainty.

"If this is taken out, I have no idea what I'll do," said Janeelia Henry, a teacher's assistant at Southern Westchester BOCES whose 10-month-old is in day care.

Thursday's rally was among a series of coordinated efforts in recent weeks to show that these cuts affect people. Last week several hundred people, some with kids in tow, turned out for a Board of Legislators meeting to challenge Astorino's rationale for cutting care as part of \$16 million in savings because of an anticipated \$166 million hole in 2011.

Astorino in March proposed chopping \$5.8 million in social services this year including \$1.5 million in day care spending that trim dollars from three programs and raising contributions for families that get subsidies.

The changes included raising fees to \$305, from

\$228; freezing the number of households at 365 that get subsidies from a program known as Title XX; and eliminating scholarships for people who earn too much to qualify for the subsidy.

Astorino has said the county cannot operate, or spend, as it has in recent years because Westchester was "going broke."

County leaders, however, are meeting with advocates and providers to come up with solutions, said Ned McCormack, communications director and senior adviser.

Nonetheless cuts are inevitable, given the county's financial situation, he said.

"Everybody understands we have tough decisions. There's a dialogue going on," McCormack said. "We're looking for ideas, we welcome their input."

While the county executive faces real budgetary challenges, these cuts may end up costing much more later on if children don't get proper care, said Kathy Halas, director of Child Care Council of Westchester.

"Money invested early on goes a long way and is more cost-effective," Halas said.

For many parents, subsidies and scholarships enable them to go to work, earn income and contribute to the economy, she said.

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These cuts should be the last alternative, not among the first, said Cora Greenberg, director of Westchester Children's Association.

"When families have a budget crisis, we don't start with our kid's needs," she said. "It should be the last possible place to look for savings."



Protesters marched Thursday from the Westchester County Center to the county offices on Martine Avenue in White Plains. (Matthew Brown/The Journal News)

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