

## At the Capitol

# Senate considers \$114M in health cuts

## Bill keeps some mental health services

By Jason Hoppin

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The Minnesota Senate is proposing \$114 million in cuts to health and human-services programs, moving the Legislature a step closer to finishing the main task of the 2010 session — balancing the budget.

The House has already released its version of a larger package of cuts, which has been met with resistance, particularly from advocates for the mentally ill. An initial vote on the Senate bill is expected Monday, with a vote by the full Senate a few days later.

"It's never good to have to cut programs, but having said that, I think we did a good job in balancing the budget without doing a lot of harm," said Sen. Linda Berglin, DFL-Minneapolis, the bill's author.

Both bills include an expansion of Medicaid programs allowed under the recently passed federal health care bill. Though the move would draw \$1 billion in matching funds into the state, Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Capitol Democrats have tussled over how much the move would cost the state, with Pawlenty initially resistant to the idea.

To help pay for the expansion, Berglin uses some money

from the Health Care Access Fund, a surcharge on hospitals that funds the state-run MinnesotaCare program.

"We don't take money that isn't there," Berglin said. "We balance the Health Care Access Fund before we take anything from that."

Expanding Medicaid to cover adults who make less than \$8,000 a year would eliminate the need for General Assistance Medical Care, a program over which Republicans and DFLers fought early in the session.

Lawmakers eventually passed a cheaper, compromise GAMC program that makes lump-sum payments to a handful of hospitals to care for GAMC patients, many of whom are homeless or suffer from mental illness or chemical dependency. But hospitals have balked at the deal, saying they can't afford to participate.

The Senate bill also maintains services at state-operated mental health facilities, which the state Department of Human Services is seeking to consolidate, a move that would cost 200 jobs. It also preserves the state general-assistance program, which provides destitute Minnesotans up to \$203 a month in living expenses.

Pawlenty proposed ending general assistance and replacing it with a smaller program.

Testimony on Berglin's bill was limited, and it did not meet the same resistance seen in the House. Mental health advocates praised her for putting together a package of cuts without causing too much damage to mental health services.

"Night and day," said Sue Abderholden, executive director of the Minnesota chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. "Let me put it this way — when Senator Berglin finished presenting, I clapped. It's not the wholesale devastation that the House did to children's mental health."

The House bill requires insurers to cover a costly regimen of intensive therapy to help treat children with autism. Efforts by House Republicans to remove that requirement have failed, but those efforts are likely to be renewed.

The bills are expected to be voted on next week. If both pass, the differences would be ironed out in a conference committee.

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