

At the Capitol

State mental health proposal draws fire

House leaders want say in reorganization

By Jason Hoppin
jhoppin@pioneerpress.com

A reorganization of state-run mental health facilities proposed by Gov. Tim Pawlenty's administration is drawing increasing fire around the Capitol, as health care leaders in the House said Thursday that they would seek final say on any such move.

The changes, which include shuttering facilities, affect sites in Anoka, Cambridge, Eveleth and elsewhere and aim to save \$17 million while providing better services for those suffering severe mental illnesses. Announced in March, the plan was to be rolled out over the next 14 months.

But it drew fire from lobbyists concerned about what the plan means for patients, including those who may be forced to seek services away from their families, and from unions, which object to a plan to lay off 200 workers.

"The entire mental health community is not supportive, and that's a problem," said Sue Abderholden, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness-Minnesota.

Rep. Paul Thissen, DFL-Minneapolis, held a news conference Thursday, flanked by a handful of other lawmakers, and accused the Minnesota Department of Human Services of expanding a mandate to examine services at facilities only in Anoka and

Cambridge.

"They took that charge and spread it across all state-operated services," said Thissen, chairman of the House Health Care and Human Services Policy and Oversight committee, referring to a group of state-run programs and facilities focused mainly on the mentally ill.

Thissen said he would try to amend a budget bill to prohibit the department from making changes without legislative approval.

Rep. Tom Rukavina, DFL-Virginia, said he was worried about changes to a behavioral health center in Eveleth, on the Iron Range.

"This is frightening, and it's got to be stopped," Rukavina said.

But Human Services Commissioner Cal Ludeman said the administration was within its rights to make the changes, which would help the department close its share of a projected \$1 billion statewide budget deficit. Capitol lawmakers and Pawlenty already have agreed on more than \$300 million in cuts.

Ludeman said the department provided too many beds in some cases and offered unnecessary levels of care in others. The changes will include revising the services at several facilities, and six — including a handful of state-run dental clinics — would close.

In their place, new psychiatric care centers would provide 24-hour stays for patients, and facilities would help them recover and go home. A new 24-hour system also would help conduct faster assessments and placements of mentally ill people.

"We need to be able to provide better care, but at lower cost," Ludeman said.

Several unions oppose the move, including AFSCME Council 5, which said last month that the cuts and resulting job loss would harm patients and put staff in danger.

The union pointed to staffing cuts at the St. Peter Regional Treatment Center, saying assaults on staff members have increased dramatically.

"The human cost of understaffing is unconscionable," council director Eliot Seide said.

In the Senate, Minneapolis DFLer Linda Berglin, chairwoman of the Health and Human Services Budget Division, said she also takes issue with the department's plan.

But Berglin added that lawmakers should not force facilities to stay open without finding a way to cover the cost. She said she is working on a way to do that, and when she does, "I will hold my own press conference."

Jason Hoppin can be reached at 651-228-5445.

