Officials asked to save adult day-care program

By MARSHA SHULER
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A plan to abandon an adult day-care program is an example of how state officials are making foolish budget-cutting decisions that will end up costing more — in both dollars and human lives, those fighting to save the program said Wednesday.

About 100 program workers and their elderly, sometimes medically disabled, clients packed a Capitol committee hearing room in a show of support for restoration of a planned $150,000 cut in state funds that will wipe out the program as of Nov. 1.

The cut is part of the Department of Health and Human Resources' proposal to trim $81.3 million in state funds from its budget. Gov. Edwin Edwards ordered almost every state department to cut its budget by 10 percent because of revenue shortfalls.

Ruth Hubbard of The Center of Baton Rouge, which runs three adult day-care facilities, argued that the program saves Louisiana money because the elderly involved would otherwise have to be placed in more costly nursing homes.

She and others urged the committee to come up with the funds to keep the program running.

"We are talking about very, very fragile people who want to stay independent," said Hubbard. She said the program is one of the fiscally soundest under DHHR.

DHHR Secretary Sandra Robinson said she sympathizes with the problem. But, she said all along people have been asking her to "rob Peter to pay Paul. Which Peter do you want me to rob now?"

Hubbard said the state needs to get its priorities in order. For instance, she said human services should come before buying state cars. She also suggested tapping some of the governor's public works "slush fund" for such things as keeping the adult day-care program going.

"Human beings have more priority than cutting a limb off a tree in my neighborhood," Hubbard said.

Without the program, she said some of the 300 elderly in the state program are going to go home and die because there is no advocate out there for them.

Rep. Kevin Reilly, D-Baton Rouge, said it appears that the state would be paying more than $1 million a year for nursing home beds with the abolition of the program. "Is this really going to save any money?" he asked.

"I recommend looking at it to see if we are being penny-wise and dollar foolish," said House Speaker Pro-temp Joe Delpit, D-Baton Rouge.

Delpit suggested that DHHR officials go back and try to come up with the $150,000 in state funds.

But DHHR official Marjorie Stewart said adult day care is one of the optional programs the state cannot afford "until we have more dollars."

"I think you have to look at all of these cuts in context," said Stewart.

She said the $81 million in DHHR cuts also affects some 800 people in nursing homes who will become ineligible to receive reimbursement.