

Healthy Start' may lose state money

Legislature looking to eliminate funding to coalition that aids pregnant women, babies

By MCKENZIE CASSIDY, mcassidy@breezenewspapers.com

Legislators are considering an elimination of the Healthy Start Coalition of Southwest Florida, an organization that helps pregnant women and their babies.

Cathy Cortez, executive director of Healthy Start, said she is concerned about how the proposal to eliminate the coalition will affect services to the community.

"You're going to lose grassroots, local decision making," she said. "Access to care is going to be affected for families."

The coalition has served an average of 17,000 families each year in four counties since 1992, but legislators are considering whether to cut the program completely to save \$4.7 million and forward the remaining dollars to county health departments to offer these services.

Even though legislators are banking on the nearly \$5 million savings, Cortez said the coalition raised \$32 million last year through its own fund-raising activities.

And these are all funds that benefit local pregnant women and would be lost if the coalition is shut down.

Cortez said the organization provides prenatal medical care for uninsured, nursing home visits, risk screenings and other services, such as nutrition, child birth education and psychosocial counseling. She is concerned over whether the Lee County Health Department can handle the influx of new patients from the coalition.

One program for mothers alone serves 7,400 women who are on Medicaid.

"If you shut us down where will they go?" asked Cortez.

She said it's possible that taxpayers may share a larger burden of care in county health departments. Overhead costs for Healthy Start last year were 5 percent, she said, yet the same costs for health departments across the United States is approximately 17 percent.

Furthermore, 56 percent of Healthy Start patients don't currently receive services from the county health department.

Healthy Start partners with Family Health Centers and Lee OB/GYN to provide prenatal medical care.

Some of their programs are free-of-charge to mothers in need, and other services are negotiated individually with the providers to keep costs low.

"This is a place where we catch families who are at risk for infant death or premature birth," she said.

Cortez said the coalition works with every clinic and hospital in its four county service area to ensure voluntary risk screenings are being administered. They contributed to an increase in the average number of screening rates in Southwest Florida from 70 to 93 percent.

For more information about Healthy Start, visit healthystartswfl.com.