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Slayton: Mental Health Cuts

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By [Tom Slayton](#)

(HOST) For commentator Tom Slayton, the debate about mental health care cuts in the state budget isn't academic - it's personal.

(SLAYTON) A close relative of mine -- let's call him Paul; that's not his name - has been afflicted with schizophrenia since the age of 19. He is now in his 60s, and his life, even with government and family assistance, has not been easy or pleasant.

A few years ago, Paul lost the stable living situation he had enjoyed for more than 20 years. He went off his medication - not an uncommon experience for mentally ill people under stress - and became unmanageable. Shortly after that, he became homeless.

For the next two years, he bounced from temporary bed to temporary bed, sometimes sleeping on a friend's couch, sometimes sleeping in his car. On more than one wintry night, with the temperature well below zero, I went out looking for him, to make sure he had shelter and would not freeze to death.

Thanks to the threadbare safety net that supports mentally ill people - emergency food shelves, church-sponsored "Stone Soup" meals, and the like -- Paul stayed alive. Eventually, Washington County Mental Health workers got him out of his car and into shelter. He went back on his meds.

But by then his health was shattered. He had crushed several vertebrae and could hardly walk. He was in constant pain, and his knees quickly rubbed bloody-raw from crawling around a tiny motel room to get meals and go to the bathroom. His physician was concerned that Paul might die.

Fortunately, he survived and eventually found a secure place to stay. He has been there for several months and, thanks to good counseling from his state-funded case manager, is once again stable and reasonably happy. But he is old and fragile and will never be healthy again.

Proposed cuts in this year's state budget are likely to cost more than 200 Vermont mental health workers their jobs and result in a significant loss of services. A recent study found that proposed cuts in this year's state budget - mostly in the Human Services Agency - will result in roughly 1,000 Vermonters losing their jobs.

What will happen to Paul if the meager state funding that supports him is lost? If his secure living situation or his case manager's job goes away? What about the hundreds, the thousands of other

Vermonters - elderly, poor, disabled, defenseless, who depend upon these and other state services?

It is obvious that these proposed budget cuts are gambling with people's lives - the lives of the weakest and most vulnerable among us.

Yes, there must be cutbacks; and yes, every area of state government must share some of that burden. The financial bottom line is important. But there is another bottom line - the human bottom line.

In my opinion, the only proper and humane course to follow is to find the money - if necessary from new, short-term taxes, or the state's rainy day fund - to soften these proposed budget cuts -- and protect the least of our fellow citizens.