

DuPage Co. plan would hit poor hardest, leaders say

By James Fuller | Daily Herald Staff

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It was a session about the loss of money, staff and hope for a packed DuPage County board room Wednesday.

Leaders of the county's health and human services and education departments laid out the damage proposed budget cuts would have on quality of life in the county.

The biggest losses would be felt by the county's poor people. The number of impoverished individuals in DuPage County has increased by 55 percent in recent years, officials said. That's created an increased demand for county services at a time when elected officials seek cuts to fix a budget shortfall.

Department heads said the proposed funding and staff cuts to their operations will:

- Scale back emergency health services.
- Cause more women to die from undetected cancers.
- Put criminals with substance abuse problems back on the streets without treatment.
- Shutter the DuPage County Historical Museum.
- Force some patients from the DuPage County Convalescent Center to find services in other parts of the state.

Most of the audience already understood the implications.

A standing-room-only crowd jammed the room 15 minutes before the meeting even began. Many in the crowd were patients of the convalescent center, some in wheelchairs, who came to plead for a reprieve.

"Lay it on them, Beth!" shouted one audience member as convalescent center Administrator Beth Welch stepped to the podium.

"I'm often concerned that we've cut too much already," Welch said. "There's nothing else to cut. "We would not be able to meet the daily needs of residents."

That means decreasing beds at the center, and possibly facing more lawsuits from a drop in the quality of patient care, Welch said.

"It's been my life and my world," said Becky Benning, a 13-year resident of the center. "Please don't take it away from me."

County board members on the finance committee spent most of the session empathizing with the audience. Several said the budget cuts were unacceptable at best. However, no one put forth any plans to stop the cuts from happening.

That will happen in the next few weeks as the various county departments vie to stay off the front line of any budget shortfalls casualties.