



State's financial crisis threatens existence of smaller agencies

By Anna Madrzyk | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 4/18/2010 12:02 AM

Josh Robison's world revolves around two places.

There's his home in Villa Park, where he lives with his parents and two dogs. And there's his day program, where he gets a tiny taste of the independence most 31-year-olds take for granted.

Inside the nondescript little building on Main Street in Lombard, there's a comfy couch facing a TV guaranteed to be tuned to "The Price is Right" on Fridays. A simply furnished kitchen. And the only friends Josh has.

The slim young man with the buzz cut and John Deere sweatshirt spends 25 hours a week at RRAF, a small day program for adults with developmental disabilities.

Robison doesn't talk, so his mother explains how important the center is to him.

"This is his happiness, his joy, his ability to feel proud of himself and in control of his life," said Roberta Robison.

Just as important, it's where he's learning the skills he'll need to live in a group home someday when his parents can no longer take care of him.

Josh Robison is one of 28 clients - ages 23 to 47 - of RRAF, which stands for Reality, Respect, Appreciation and Fulfillment. The tiny agency gets just \$10.39 an hour per person from the state to provide day care and training services for these severely disabled adults.

Until the state stopped paying. The cash-strapped state sent RRAF just \$346 in February and \$303 in March. The center's expenses during those two months were more than \$61,000.

Families faced the possibility of losing their lifeline as early as next month, but the agency got a last-minute reprieve on Thursday when the state approved hardship funding for six months.

"It gives us breathing room to strengthen ourselves, but we still do need to look for alternative funding," said Marilyn Flanagan, the center's executive director.

While layoffs and curriculum cuts at school districts are making headlines throughout the suburbs, the state's financial crisis threatens the very survival of small, under-the-radar agencies like RRAF.

These programs serve some of the state's most vulnerable residents, who often have nowhere else to go.

The Philip J. Rock Center and School in Glen Ellyn - the state's only public school for children who are blind and deaf - also got an 11th-hour reprieve. The school was on the brink of closing until the state comptroller's office announced it would cut a check for \$1.3 million. When the payment came it was for \$1 million, said Peggy Whitlow, chief administrator. It's likely enough to keep the program going through the end of June.

Alan Henry, communications director for Comptroller Daniel W. Hynes, said the state was able to respond to the Rock Center's plea.

"The problem is, when there are so many bills and so many emergencies and such a big backlog, it's difficult to address every emergency situation," he said. "We do our best to help (agencies) out with the limited resources we have, but the reality is, the pie isn't very big."

The state has \$4.4 billion in unpaid bills.

"The decay and erosion of the nonprofit sector is occurring at all levels," said Laurel O'Sullivan, senior director, public policy for Donors Forum, a statewide association of grant makers and nonprofits. "It is having a direct effect on the residents of Illinois and their quality of life."

Nowhere is that clearer than at RRAF.

Only a few of RRAF's clients are capable of staying home alone for a brief period; the rest need 24-hour supervision.

In a letter pleading RRAF's case to state representatives, one mother described her severely autistic daughter as "24 going on 2." The young woman is just getting the hang of toilet training. "She has no concept of danger," her mother wrote, "and has to be watched constantly."

The low-cost program - the annual budget is \$425,000 - gives parents a break so they can continue to care for their adult children at home.

"You've got families in their 70s living with elder children and saving loads of money for the state," Flanagan said. Other parents would have to quit their jobs if the program closes.

As the state's budget crisis unfolded, RRAF moved to cut costs last year. The agency left one staff position unfilled and did not contribute to employee retirement.

Flanagan stopped cashing her own paychecks in February, and waived her salary to cover the \$4,125 cost for the recent accreditation survey.

"The priority is to keep my staff, so whatever I have to do, I will do," she said. "When you have staff making \$24,000 to \$26,000 a year, you are asking them to take enough of a cut as it is."

In her application for a hardship grant, Flanagan asked the state for \$30,000 a month to cover expenses for the next six months. The state still owes the center \$118,000 from previous missed payments. RRAF also receives support from local chapters of Knights of Columbus, Lions Club, Rotary Club, American Legion and the DuPage Community Foundation.

Unsure of what to expect down the road, the agency will try to boost donations and also look into refinancing its Lombard properties, Flanagan said. But for the near future, the doors remain open.

And that's what matters to families.

The Rock Center has 14 children living in its residential facility, and also provides services to more than 400 children through the schools. Families are "very anxious and very concerned," Whitlow said.

"I hope that, given some added time," she said, "the legislature will be able to get something in place to provide relief not just to our program, but to other agencies and schools that are undergoing a tremendous shortfall."