

Disability program changes draw concerns

By Christine Sexton
News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE — A Senate panel on Wednesday took the first steps toward overhauling a complicated and expensive program designed to help thousands of Florida residents with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

The proposal (SB 82), sponsored by Sen. Aaron Bean, R-Fernandina Beach, would represent a significant change to what is known as the iBudget program, which receives state and federal money to provide an array of Medicaid services so people with disabilities can live at home and outside of institutions.

The legislation drew

passionate testimony in opposition. But Bean tried to assuage detractors, contending that his bill would not result in reductions in services.

“The demise of this bill would occur should we make reductions in people’s lifelines, so that’s not where we’re going,” Bean told members of the Senate Children, Families and Elder Affairs Committee.

But Bean’s bill would revamp how people with disabilities get access to support coordinators and how they appeal decisions related to the amounts of money they are allocated, two issues that advocates say are critical.

Republicans are pushing for changes in the wake

of perennial deficits in the program.

“To the public and everyone who’s on this waiver (program) ... if we don’t make changes, the whole thing is going to collapse under its weight,” Bean said.

Currently, families and people with disabilities can choose from 1,082 support coordinators across the state. The coordinators are on call for clients around the clock and help them obtain services needed to live in the community.

Bean’s bill would have the state competitively bid those services and ultimately award contracts to two or more organizations. The competitive procurement would have to be

initiated by Oct. 1.

Laura Mohesky, chair of the Support Coordination Association of Florida, told senators the bill “just doesn’t sit well” with her.

“This looks like managed care of support coordinators,” she said.

Agency for Persons with Disabilities Director Barbara Palmer said she was concerned that the proposal would move “significant additional needs reviews” from her agency to the Agency for Health Care Administration. But AHCA wouldn’t conduct the reviews, which are used to determine whether people’s iBudgets should be increased because of additional needs.

Instead, the bill would

direct AHCA to contract with a vendor to conduct the reviews.

Palmer told committee members she thinks “our agency is very equipped to deal with it” and added that moving the process to a different agency “adds another layer of complication.”

The Senate committee voted 5-2 to approve the bill, with Sen. Kevin Rader, D-Delray Beach, and Sen. Victor Torres, D-Orlando, in opposition.

In the iBudget program, each person has an individual budget to spend on services they require. A person’s budget is determined using a complex algorithm.

For several years, Florida officials have struggled to figure out how much should

be spent on the program, which offers services to roughly 34,000 people with disabilities.

Bean, who chairs the Senate Health and Human Services Appropriations Subcommittee, said his first spending priority for the upcoming year is to plug a \$107 million deficit that has occurred because the Agency for Persons with Disabilities has spent more on the iBudget program than what the Legislature agreed to allocate.

In addition to the deficit, the program has a waiting list of 21,000 people seeking services.

“Unless we make changes, we don’t have the resources to handle everybody,” Bean said.

ZOO

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The sensory comfort kits were provided by Kids Only Dental Place, Grins and Giggles Pediatric Dentistry and Family Focus Eye Care.

Conservation Education Curator Jade Salamone helped lead the zoo’s certification work

and coordinated with partners such as the UF Center for Autism and Related Disorders and UF Health for Autism and Neurodevelopment to allow everyone to enjoy the wonders of the zoo.

The sensory bags and accommodations are now permanent fixtures at the zoo, allowing sensitive individuals to visit anytime, she said.

Salamone said the certification will be renewed

each year and the zoo will continue to find new ways to make it as accessible as possible.

“Our keepers are being trained here to work at zoos all over the country and this is a need in every community,” Salamone said.

Families are encouraged to download the free KultureCity App to see all the sensory-inclusive features that are available while visiting the SF Teaching Zoo.

FEEDING

From Page B1

The technology is key to propelling strawberry growers into the future, Wishnatzki said, and could help other farmers in the U.S. and world who face similar issues.

“Where we are right now is the cell phone of the early 1980s. Back in those days when I got my first cell phone, I just wanted to make a phone call. And that’s what growers want to do today, is just get their berries picked,” he said. “They’re not thinking about the smartphone of the future and what our machines will be in the future. But I see this platform as something we’re going to build upon.”

Wishnatzki shared his success story with hundreds of other scientists from around the world at the University of Florida Wednesday as encouragement that progress can be made while the agricultural

world faces the challenges of fewer producers and more people to feed.

The IFAS-hosted event brought business leaders and scientists to UF to share their thoughts on what’s next for the future of food.

Agricultural leaders, farmers and scientists alike say they have looked to Florida as either a ground zero for research, or a perfect hub to expand their crops or animals.

Cristina Espejo, head of Human Resources and the Environmental Social Plan for salmon production company Atlantic Sapphire, said the Norway-based business built a facility in Miami because of the region’s water resources.

Company officials settled on Homestead in South Florida as a perfect place to build their next “bluehouse” — a greenhouse, but with water to farm fish — in more pristine conditions than open-water farming pens, she said.

“We’re talking about very large amounts of

protein being produced,” she said.

Land-based salmon facilities like Atlantic Sapphire’s, she said, are the future of salmon production.

Matthew Johnston, head of the global vegetable seeds and flowers department at Syngenta, said the global agriculture company has tinkered with many products, but its modified tomato in particular could be seen on the plates at Florida restaurants in the unforeseen future.

“We’ve got tomatoes with flavor that are driving the consumption of tomatoes up,” Johnston said. “I’m sure with those restaurants here in Florida, we’re going to see a continued demand for those things.”

UF President Kent Fuchs encouraged the scientists to continue their work in finding ways to feed the projected 10 billion people on Earth in the future.

“I cannot think of anything more important than the future of food,” he said.

Q&A

From Page B1

Q. Will it lower my utility bill?

A. Probably not, at least anytime soon. Even if this turns into the great deal GRU envisions, its managers want to pay down debt and build up reserves, and city commissioners want to maintain the transfer into the general fund. It could take the pressure off future rate increases, but no one is talking yet about cutting rates for GRU customers.

Q: Why does GRU want to do this?

A. GRU managers think it will be cheaper to buy power than generate it at its own plants, some of which are old and inefficient. GRU needs to be able to provide all the power its customers need at any point in time. So it will either need to upgrade and replace some of its power plants, or increase its ability to get power from other suppliers, or a mix of all of that.

Q. Why now?

A. FP&L is extending its transmission lines to the western Panhandle where it recently acquired Gulf Power. GRU is near that path, so FP&L has agreed to pay for building the connection that could be \$200 million if GRU did it otherwise. GRU says that opportunity might be missed if it doesn’t act soon.

Q: What is the downside?

A. It likely means dozens of good-paying local jobs will be cut eventually, probably beginning in less than three years.

It’s also a bet that the \$9 million annual cost of connection, plus the cost of buying power from other sources, will be less than the cost of generating power right here in Gainesville, over the next 30 years. GRU managers say they are very confident this will produce savings of about \$10 million a year, and avoid even more in capital expenses,

but there’s no guarantee.

Q. What is the upside?

A. Hopefully a savings of about \$10 million a year, which could help GRU pay down its debt, sustain the general fund transfer and take the pressure off utility rates. It also avoids the challenges of building a big new power plant, which given current technologies, would need to burn fossil fuels.

Given the city’s experience with a biomass plant,

that’s not a likely option. There is not yet a feasible way to store enough solar power to provide energy around the clock.

And GRU carries a heavy debt load that might make it expensive to borrow for a big capital project.

It might also be a way to more quickly reach the city’s goal of getting all GRU power from renewable resources by 2045. When GRU goes out on the market to buy power from other suppliers, it can require it come from wind, solar or other renewables.

PUBLIC NOTICE OF ENACTMENT OF AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF ALACHUA, FLORIDA

Notice is hereby given that the City Commission of the City of Alachua will hold a public hearing on a proposed ordinance. The hearing will be held on January 27, 2020, at 6:00 p.m., in the James A. Lewis Commission Chambers in City Hall, located at 15100 NW 142nd Terrace, Alachua, Florida.

The ordinance title is as follows:

ORDINANCE 20-03

AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF ALACHUA, FLORIDA, RELATING TO THE AMENDMENT OF THE CITY’S COMPREHENSIVE PLAN; AMENDING GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND POLICIES IN THE ADMINISTRATION AND IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION, FUTURE LAND USE, TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING, COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND NATURAL GROUNDWATER AQUIFER RECHARGE, CONSERVATION AND OPEN SPACE, RECREATION, INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION, CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS, AND PUBLIC SCHOOL FACILITIES ELEMENTS BASED ON THE EVALUATION AND APPRAISAL OF THE PLAN PURSUANT TO SECTION 163.3191 OF FLORIDA STATUTES; PROVIDING A REPEALING CLAUSE; PROVIDING SEVERABILITY; AND PROVIDING AN EFFECTIVE DATE.

At the public hearing, all interested parties may appear and be heard with respect to the application. Copies of the application are available for public inspection at the Planning and Community Development Department, 15100 NW 142nd Terrace, Alachua, Florida, on any regular business day between the hours of 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Written comments on the application may be sent to the following address: City of Alachua, Planning and Community Development, P.O. Box 9, Alachua, FL 32616. Notice is given pursuant to Section 286.0105, Florida Statutes, that, in order to appeal any decision made at the public hearing, you will need a record of the proceedings, and that, for such purpose, you may need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made, which includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, any persons with a disability requiring reasonable accommodation in order to participate in this meeting should call the City Clerk at (386) 418-6100 x 101 at least 48 hours prior to the public hearing.

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