

Children's home- and community-based services exempted from looming Medicaid cuts

The state has exempted children's home- and community-based services from 1.5% across-the-board Medicaid cuts scheduled to take effect Sept. 1.

The decision is a win for behavioral health advocates, who have urged against reductions to children's services, saying they would be especially detrimental this year as a result of the Covid-19 crisis.

"We are very appreciative of this decision on the exemption," said Alice Bufkin, director of policy for child and adolescent health at the Citizens' Committee for Children, which co-leads the advocacy coalition Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids. "We do hope it's coming from a recognition of how important these services are."

Some 6,700 children currently receive the services. And about 67% of the kids who qualify do so because of serious mental disturbances, Bufkin noted.

The services can help to prevent hospitalizations and greater levels of care needed down the line, she said. Bufkin has previously noted that, even before the pandemic, children and families were struggling to get the services they needed. And because behavioral health providers already operate on slim margins, the cut could have "tipped the scale" when it came to the ability of providers to stay open and provide essential services.

In a letter recently delivered to state leaders, members of the Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids, had written: "HCBS services are at the core of the state's Medicaid redesign, intended to help meet the mental health needs of children in their homes and communities and prevent the need for institutional levels of care."

They also noted that, in previous budget seasons, children's behavioral health services had been exempted from cuts.

A spokeswoman for the state Department of Health said in a statement provided to *Crain's* that, "This action provides clarity for these providers and is consistent with our original intent."

Bufkin is now focusing on what's left to be done.

"We want to keep fighting because this is an important [part] of the behavioral health system, but it's just one component," Bufkin said. "We absolutely join the city and state in how essential it is that the federal government come through with another Covid relief package that supports states and localities," she added.

Absent that, there likely will be more cuts, she said.