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Family advocates push to get health funding restored

By Sara Foss

CAPITOL – Children’s advocates are asking Gov. David Paterson to restore funding for a program that gives families with newborns and young children regular visits from trained family support workers, as well as community health nurses.

The goal of the program, called Healthy Families New York, is to improve the health and well-being of at-risk children by educating and supporting their parents.

Paterson’s proposed budget would cut Healthy Families New York by 25 percent.

There are 39 Healthy Families programs throughout New York, including three in Albany, Rensselaer and Schenectady counties. In Schenectady, 135 families are served by the program, although Peggy Sheehan, program manager for Healthy Schenectady Families, which is based at Schenectady County Public Health, said there is a waiting list for the program and that “it could easily serve 300.”

Sheehan said she didn’t know how much money Healthy Schenectady Families would lose under Paterson’s budget proposal. “I am worried, especially during these economic times,” she said. “We’re already not meeting need. If we start cutting back, I worry that home visiting will just go away.”

Healthy Families New York received an 8 percent budget cut in August; as a result, about 500 families lost services, according to the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy in Albany.

If the cuts are approved, “You’re looking at thousands of families who will be without assistance,” said Jenn O’Connor, a senior policy associate at the Schuyler Center.

Home visiting programs help reduce child abuse, and children’s advocates fear that incidents could rise if such programs are cut or even eliminated. “You get increases in child abuse during economic downturns,” O’Connor said. “Our big fear is that, by decreasing services, kids will be hurt.”

The budget would also eliminate child welfare preventive spending dollars that partially fund the Nurse-Family Partnership, a nurse home visiting program, and other home visiting programs for children. This would mean a loss of services to 1,200 families in New York City and Monroe and Onondaga counties, according to the Schuyler Center.

The Schuyler Center is also concerned about a reduction to the federal block grant that provides child care subsidies to low-income families so they can receive child care before and after school.

Child care subsidies have taken a hit during the past decade; right now, 46,000 fewer children are served by subsidies than in 2003-04, with an additional 10,000 cuts anticipated this year.

The Schuyler Center was happy with one aspect of Paterson’s budget proposal. It maintained funding for pre-K programs that the organization believes are crucial.

“We dodged a bullet with pre-K,” O’Connor said.

But the organization believes that home visiting and child care serve as pipelines to pre-K programs, and if those programs are cut, “the system will fall apart,” O’Connor said.