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Newborn program, other initiatives, bear brunt of budget cuts

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02/07/2003

Associated Press Newswires

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LYNN, Mass. (AP) - At the end of February, 21-year-old Meghan Daly and 3,220 other young Massachusetts parents will lose their partners in parenthood.

Since soon after her daughter was born two years ago, Daly - then 18, single and estranged from her parents - has relied on the state's **Healthy Families** Newborn Home Visiting program to help her find shelter, access medical care, and enroll in community college.

In the coming months, Daly had hoped her home visitor would guide her through the daunting process of potty training and helping Caitlin make the transition to a "big-girl's bed."

"There are a lot of issues popping up day to day," Daly said. "There are a lot of things that are so unknown."

The newborn program, designed to curb **child abuse** and neglect by helping young mothers navigate the sometimes perilous paths of new parenthood, was a target of Gov. Mitt Romney's spending cuts last week - one of several prevention programs eclipsed in the name of a balanced budget.

With this latest round of reductions, which sliced another \$4 million out of **Healthy Families**, the six-year-old program's budget has been cut nearly in half since June 2002, to about \$11 million.

Over the past two years, as the state's tax revenues have plummeted, spending on anti-smoking programs has been cut by 92 percent, breast cancer screening by 70 percent, teen pregnancy prevention by 58 percent, AIDS prevention by 30 percent, and prostate cancer screening by 83 percent.

As he seeks to plug a gaping deficit in the state's \$23 billion budget, Romney has determined that these programs - as important as they may be - are not essential. The governor cut the

program as part of a \$650 million plan to balance the 2002-2003 budget, which covers spending through June 30. He has estimated a budget deficit of nearly \$3 billion in 2003-2004.

"Although we feel in a perfect world we would like to continue these prevention programs, we felt that we needed to focus on ensuring the most vulnerable populations continued to receive benefits," said Romney spokeswoman Nicole St. Peter. "When the economy improves, we would like to restore these programs."

By the time that happens, however, opponents predict, these short-term budget-balancing measures will have created a long-term budget crisis of a different sort, with more children entering foster care, more adults suffering from AIDS and smoke-related illnesses, and more of the poor and disabled demanding services from the state's Medicaid program.

"These are shortsighted cuts," said Marylou Sudders, president and CEO of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which helps administer the **Healthy Families** program. "They are not thinking through the long-term consequences of the long-term expense to the commonwealth. And, more importantly, the long-term consequences to these children and these families."

Providing preventive counseling through the **Healthy Families** program costs about \$2,400 per child annually, according to MSPCC, compared to more than \$20,000 per year to keep an abused child in foster care. The program's focus on prenatal care, Sudders said, has led to a decrease in neonatal intensive care stays, which can cost the state and its hospitals hundreds of thousands of dollars a piece.

The program will cease to exist at the end of February, when funding will run out for the 3,000 families now enrolled.

In laying out his strategy for solving the budget's crisis, the new governor has made a distinction between valuable programs "that we'd like to have" and those "that we need to have."

In that political calculation, budget-watchers say, prevention programs become an easy target.

"These are shortsighted cuts in one sense, but clearly inevitable given the enormity of this budget crisis," said Michael Widmer, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation.

"It's a real dilemma. We invest in prevention because it's the right thing to do. But it's often the first thing cut in the difficult times."

The dilemma, however, opponents argue, is one of Romney's own making, stemming from his campaign promise and continued pledge not to raise taxes.

"These kinds of choices are the product of a political calculation," said Geoffrey Wilkinson, executive director of the Massachusetts Public Health Association. "There is no reason why we

have to accept the kind of human pain and suffering that he's willing to inflict out of his political calculations."

For Subrena Service, 22, who became a single mother at age 17, the **Healthy Families** program was an essential tool for her as she grappled with parenthood, living in a homeless shelter for teen mothers.

"Without it, I think I pretty much would have been lost," said Service, who went on to work for MSPCC as a home visitor in the **Healthy Families** program. "Some of us really wouldn't have a future without it."