

# Services to disabled could face budget ax

## Confab ponders loss of funding for nonrequired items

**By Andrew Abel**  
Delaware State News

DOVER — As the state faces budget shortfalls, Delaware residents with disabilities fear services not required by the federal government, such as transportation and home health care, could be cut.

The Sheraton Dover Hotel hosted the 11th Annual Life Con-

ference Thursday offering educational opportunities for people with disabilities, their families and caregivers, as well as a glimpse at the latest technologies that assist the disabled in everyday life.

Exhibitors filled the conference area as support and advocacy groups for different medical conditions handed out informational packets, and technology companies displayed everything from automatic door openers to computers controlled by nothing more than the user's eye movement.

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**Jennifer Ridgley, left, of Smyrna, chats with Jean Knotts, of Clayton, Thursday at the Life Conference held at the Dover Sheraton Hotel. Both women serve on the Developmental Disabilities Council, which advocates for disabled Delawareans.**

# Disabled

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One of the more talked about events was a discussion about the state of the economy and its impact on people with disabilities.

Matt Salo, director of the Health and Human Services Committee with the National Governors Association, said budget deficits are nothing new, but the size and scope of the deficit facing Delaware is quite significant.

Edward C. Ratledge, a University of Delaware demographics professor, presented a slide show outlining the fiscal problems the state is facing. While consumer debt continues to climb, the percentage of disposable income in Delaware has fallen from a high of 12 percent in 1980 to less than 1 percent in 2005, he said.

Tax revenue has flattened because businesses are doing poorly and people are not working due to layoffs and reduced hours, Mr. Ratledge said. Since 2006, state expenditures have exceeded revenue, meaning legislators must make changes to balance the budget, he said.

Legislators are left with two options, Mr. Salo said: raising taxes and cutting spending. Neither is a popular choice and both hurt the economy, he said. A large percentage of the state's budget is allocated for Medicaid, making it an appealing target for legislators searching for ways to cut spending, Mr. Salo said.

"The last thing anyone wants to do is cut Medicaid, but the reality is that some programs will likely get the ax," he said. "The ones that will go first will probably be those not required by the federal government, such as transportation, home care, prescription drug programs and dental plans."

Jamie Wolfe is a member of the Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council and has lived in her apartment in Dover for 10 years. She suffers from arthrogyposis, a condition characterized by stiff joints and underdeveloped limb muscles, she said. Ms. Wolfe relies on home health care, she said.

"Without the home health care I wouldn't be able to live on my own," Ms. Wolfe said. "If legislators cut out that part of Medicaid, I would have to live in a nursing home, which would be more expensive."

Patsy Brown, president of the Sussex County chapter of the Amputee Support Group of Delaware, said she relies heavily on transportation paid for by Medicaid.

"Without it I wouldn't be able to get around," she said.

Not only could state Medicaid cuts reduce services for the disabled but, because the federal government matches state spending for Medicaid, the money lost would effectively be doubled, Mr. Salo said.

"For years states have ac-



Delaware State News/Dave Chambers

**Hundreds visited the Sheraton Dover Hotel Thursday morning and checked out the exhibitors at the 11th annual Life Conference.**



**Jamie Wolfe, of Dover, a University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies specialist, says, "Without the home health care I wouldn't be able to live on my own. If legislators cut out that part of Medicaid, I would have to live in a nursing home, which would be more expensive."**

quired additional federal funding by taking existing programs and converted them to Medicaid programs, so that the federal government will match whatever money the state is spending on the program," he said. "But the government has gotten better at identifying these tricks and some ugly fights have arisen in the last decade. Now Congress is working on a recovery package that would total near \$87 billion and would be distributed to the states, alleviating some budget cuts and tax increases."

"However, with \$80 billion in budget deficits throughout the country for this year and another \$120 billion for next year, it just isn't enough," Mr. Salo said.

As people lose their jobs in a

harsh economy, the number of people on Medicaid will increase, Mr. Salo said.

In 2006, more than 15 percent of Delawareans had some form of disability, Mr. Ratledge said. Throughout Delaware the number of people with disabilities will continue to increase, he said.

"In the next 20 years the number of Delaware residents over the age of 65 is going to double," Mr. Ratledge said.

The difficulty for legislators is that it's hard to consider long-term plans when they have only six months to balance the budget, he said. It is going to take some smart and creative decision making to fix this problem, Mr. Salo said.

The proposed \$87 billion re-



**Matt Salo, of the National Governors Association, gave the keynote address, "A New Administration...What Is In Store for Persons with Disabilities?" at the conference.**

covery package would continue through 2010, he said. Ideally states will be in a better economic situation by then, but legislators need to implement changes to ensure that once the money is gone, the state won't slip back into the same predicament, Mr. Salo said.

One possible improvement could be in information technologies, he said. No one doubts creating electronic prescriptions and digitized medical records will save the state money, Mr. Salo said, but improvements like these include substantial up-front costs, he said.

"Political leaders need to look further down the road, but they're not going to unless there is pressure from the people," Mr. Salo said. "It's important to engage your state representatives and ensure they're making good decisions."

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