

## Deep cuts to Medicaid for children a negotiating tactic, legislators say

By David Ress/staff • dress@newsleader.com • February 12, 2011

A legislative vote to slash Medicaid funds for children's mental health care was meant as a bargaining chip, say local legislators who voted for the cut.

Dels. Richard P. "Dickie" Bell, R.-Staunton, and Steve Landes, R-Weyers Cave, said the cut was meant to force action to rein in soaring costs of children's mental health services.

Children's and mental health advocates say the House of Delegates' Thursday vote to cut \$21.6 million from the Medicaid budget for children's mental health could mean some young people won't get the care they need.

In its vote Thursday, the House of Delegates included a directive that children needing mental health rehabilitation services go to the Comprehensive Services Act programs localities run.

But local governments say it already is a stretch paying for the children in foster care, juvenile justice and special education systems that the CSA is supposed to cover.

"We know that costs and efficiency are best managed closest to home. ... It means more appropriate treatment, too," said Landes, a member of the Appropriations Committee panel that proposed the cut and the directive.

Landes said growth in Medicaid spending on in-home and in-school children's mental health services are out of control.

State records, obtained by The News Leader after repeated Freedom of Information Act requests, show overbilling, treatment by unqualified staff and improper assessment of children are common.

Bell said he reluctantly voted for the cut to force tighter Medicaid oversight.

Bell said he thinks the Medicaid cut will be rolled back when the most influential members of both House and Senate meet behind closed doors near the end of the legislative session to negotiate a compromise on a new budget.

"That's what I'm hoping," Bell said.

The Senate's version of the bill did not cut Medicaid, and included significant increases in Medicaid, mental health services and CSA funding not part of the House proposal.