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McGreevey rethinks preferred drug list

Protests spur officials to look for \$39 million to save health benefits

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BY SUSAN K. LIVIO
Star-Ledger Staff

The McGreevey administration is considering abandoning proposed cuts to two health insurance programs for the poor and disabled after a series of Statehouse protests by advocates, administration officials said yesterday.

Gov. James E. McGreevey's proposed budget calls for creating a "preferred drug list" that would limit access to prescriptions under Medicaid and cutting dental health benefits to disabled adults on Medicaid to save \$39 million.

But lawmakers and McGreevey administration officials are having second thoughts on creating a preferred drug list to save an estimated \$24 million, according to two administration sources. In addition, advocates and administration officials are working on finding the \$15 million to maintain dental care for disabled adults on Medicaid, the sources said.

The proposed cuts drew another round of Statehouse protests yesterday as McGreevey and legislative leaders attempt to negotiate a state budget that must be signed into law by the end of the month.

Consumers, families and health professionals urged the governor to abandon plans to adopt a preferred drug list. Another group of activists handed over a plastic blue wheelbarrow containing 2,500 letters from mental health consumers and their supporters from around the state. Their letters pleaded with McGreevey to maintain dental benefits for adults and rethink charging co-payments every time patients go for a medical visit or fill a prescription.

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"It is extremely moving to see your commitment to this process," Kevin Ryan, McGreevey's deputy chief of management and operations, told a packed room of more than 60 mental health advocates and consumers before taking the wheelbarrow. "I promise you your voice will be heard. I will deliver these letters to the office of the governor."

Over the past month, advocates have protested proposed cuts to health care programs for the poor at least three times at the Statehouse. Proposed budget cuts also have drawn protests from advocates for the arts and historic preservation and impoverished school districts. On Saturday, more than 2,000 people protested budget cuts and called for an increased income tax on New Jersey's highest wage-earners.

Yesterday, Sarah Yourman 13, of Fair Lawn, joined the debate on the preferred drug list by describing how newer medications have enabled her to competitively ski, despite living with diabetes and cystic fibrosis.

"I would ask Governor McGreevey to please -- please -- think twice before he makes a decision that would take away other people's ability to get the medications they need," she said. "In the end, it will not save money."

Joseph Cinko of Absecon said that with the help of a dozen medications a month, he is able to manage his physical and mental illnesses, work a part-time job and keep an apartment. But he said the budget proposal to add a \$3 co-payment for each prescription "will financially cripple people like me."

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