

Fresno Co. feels cuts as Brown signs budget bills

Welfare programs, students at community colleges hit.

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By Barbara Anderson and Heather Somerville / The Fresno Bee

Budget bills signed Thursday by Gov. Jerry Brown will impose the deepest cuts to social-service programs for children and families in years, Fresno County officials say.

Fresno County will lose more than \$20 million for welfare programs. Among the cuts: a program that helps pregnant teens who are on welfare complete their high school education.

"Over the past nine years, this is the most significant cut to social services that we've had," said Sanja Kovacevic, business manager for Fresno County's Department of Social Services.

The 13 budget bills signed by the governor cut \$8.2 billion from the state's \$26.6 billion budget deficit. Combined with other measures, \$11.2 billion was trimmed from the deficit.

Among the local effects:

First 5 Commission: Brown approved taking \$1 billion away from First 5 commissions, which provide services for young children. The money originally came from a tobacco tax. The county-based commissions will have until June 30, 2012, to give the funds to the state.

In Fresno County, this will cost \$17 million. Planning will stop for some programs, such as one for young fathers, and other programs will be cut, said Kendra Rogers, executive director. Agency executives called it an "illegal raid."

This measure could face a court challenge. The Fresno County commission has authorized staff to pursue legal action if that's the best recourse to stop the transfer, Rogers said.

Community colleges: The state will charge community college students more for classes. The cost of attending will increase by 38%, from \$26 per unit to \$36.

Community college enrollment could dip, educators say.

"Students are going to make some tough decisions," said Frank Gornick, chancellor of West Hills Community College.

Gornick expects enrollment at West Hills to fall by 5% or 10% next fall. Some state officials have predicted a 15% reduction in enrollment across the community college system.

Welfare: Fresno County families on welfare will receive less in cash-assistance beginning July 1, and thousands of adults could be cut completely off cash aid.

Families on CalWORKs will see an 8% reduction in welfare cash-aid payments, said Kovacevic of Fresno County. Those cuts are among the most far-reaching of the changes approved Thursday, she said.

Adults on welfare also will have 48 months instead of 60 months before they lose cash aid. This could affect about 5,700 adults in Fresno County, Kovacevic said. And about 4,790 people may no longer qualify for CalWORKs because a smaller portion of their incomes will be disregarded, she said.

Funding will be eliminated for CalLearn, a program to help pregnant teens who are on welfare. The program provides services to help the teens stay in school.

Fresno County received \$3 million for the program. More than 700 teens are enrolled.