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Stimulus helps, but social services strained

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Leaders of social safety net agencies for children, the elderly and the unemployed are sharing similar stories of dwindling state and charitable funding resources in the wake of an ever-escalating demand.

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Patricia Wilson, commissioner for Kentucky's Family Based Services for the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, led off the panel discussion at the Highland Heights Civic Center Tuesday, March 24.

The program, "How these Critical Times Affect our Families" was the second in the Campbell County Democrat Woman's Club's non-partisan series "Whose Life is it Anyway?"

Amidst shrinking budgets and tough economic times the demand has never been greater, Wilson said.

While the stimulus will provide some relief, any program that is implemented will probably have to go away when the stimulus money runs out, she said.

But Kentucky will increase food stamp payments by 13.6 percent using federal stimulus money as the number of new applicants for the benefits spikes, Wilson said.

Primarily, the minimum benefit payments will go up, she said.

Vickie Henderson, director of the Northern Kentucky Children's Advocacy Center in Florence, said her agency has nothing left to cut but staff.

The most urgent need is for people to talk to their legislators, especially with legislators threatening that 2010 might be worse in terms of budget cuts, said

The center's services include interviewing children in suspected cases of abuse, mental health evaluations, and providing comprehensive child sexual abuse medical examinations.

"Our legislators have got to know they cannot balance the budget on the backs of our kids and our elderly," Henderson said.

Henderson asked what happens to the cases of severe child abuse and neglect while the state workers in the attorney's office were on furlough for a week.

"When you have a Commonwealth Attorney's office that shuts down for a week, which is what happened in Campbell County, that's scary," she said.

With a \$1 billion budget and 4,200 employees, the Cabinet for Health and Family Services was one of

the primary targets when state legislators looked for budget savings.

"A lot of the programs eliminated were contracts for intensive in-home services that were keeping children out of foster care, and that was hard to take," Wilson said.

Wilson said she tells her staff around the state that the next 18 months will be rough because more cuts are expected in Kentucky's 2010 budget.

But so far, the Cabinet hasn't eliminated staff because people are need to take applications to determine funding needs and to knock on doors to investigate cases of abuse.

"If we do not do those things, then they do not get done," Wilson said.

Wilson said she appreciated the understanding of the agencies represented on the panel, including the Newport-based Brighton Center, and their willingness to still partner with he department.

Despite budget cuts, Brighton Center is stretching to serve a growing number of people who never sought out their services before, said Denise Govan, family center director for the Brighton Center.

There are more people coming to the center's food pantry and other services who never had before, Govan said.

A comparison of the months between July and December 2007 and the same months in 2008 at Brighton Center's Career Connections program tell the story of people seeking help with finding work.

The Career Connections program served a total of 6,780 families in the final two quarters of 2007 (July to December), and 23,260 families in the final two quarters of 2008.

"It has almost quadrupled, and that's quite dramatic," Govan said.
