

PHOTOS BY CRAIG BORCK, PIONEER PRESS

**Rochelle Turan** explains how reductions in health and human services funding have affected her two sons, who are disabled. Taylor, 8, is next to her, while Marshall, 4, is held by personal care attendant Cara Norton. Pawlenty administration officials say cuts are needed to rein in health care costs because of a projected \$700 million deficit.

# How cuts hit home

Parents and providers testify against reductions in health, human services funding.

BY RACHEL E.  
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Tears welled just below the surface for many of those in Room 123 of the state Capitol on Tuesday.

Judith Blackford of Lake Elmo barely held back her tears as she told senators about the financial toll her 20-year-old son's spina bifida and autism have taken on their family. Jane Strauss of Minneapolis struggled to control tears as she testified about her 7-year-old

son's multiple congenital anomalies and her family's needs.

And Sen. Becky Lourey, DFL-Kerrick, let her tears fall during the Senate Health and Human Services Committee hearing about the human impact of Gov. Tim Pawlenty's budget.

"This is so overwhelming. I can't stand it," said Lourey, after listening to more than an hour of tales from people like Strauss and Blackford.



**Sen. Paul Koering**, R-Fort Ripley, comforts Sen. Becky Lourey, DFL-Kerrick, who broke down after listening to testimony from parents at the Senate hearing Tuesday.

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(continued)

Their testimony, along with that of about two-dozen other Minnesotans, largely denounced the 2003 cuts in the state's health and social services programs and Gov. Tim Pawlenty's 2005 budget proposal to end some state programs for health care and freeze others.

Human Services Commissioner Kevin Goodno said the emotional testimony is not necessarily easy to hear but is expected. He added that the governor's budget was based on protecting core services to the most vulnerable Minnesotans — seniors, children and disabled people.

Changes are needed to rein in spiraling growth in state health care programs as the state confronts a projected \$700 million deficit, say Pawlenty administration officials. Even if all of the changes the governor proposed last month went into effect, they said, Minnesota still is more generous with health care benefits than any surrounding states.

But arguments like that do not help someone like Scott Mewhorter.

Mewhorter, who spoke at Tuesday's hearings, was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia several years ago. As a result, he went deeply into debt after multiple hospitalizations. Now stable on a regime of medications, he holds down temporary jobs doing assembly work.

"My medications have been absolutely fantastic. ... I feel normal," said 29-year-old Mewhorter. But those medications cost \$550 a month and would be impossible for him to afford were he not on MinnesotaCare, a state subsidized health insurance program.

The governor's budget proposes eliminating adults without children like Mewhorter from the program. That change would leave between 14,000 to 19,000



PHOTOS BY CRAIG BORCK, PIONEER PRESS  
**With her son Taylor, 8,** at her side, Rochelle Turan talks about the impact of past and proposed cuts in health and human services programs on her family. Taylor has some disabilities, as does Turan's son Marshall, 4, who also attended the hearing.

adults a year without state-subsidized health insurance.

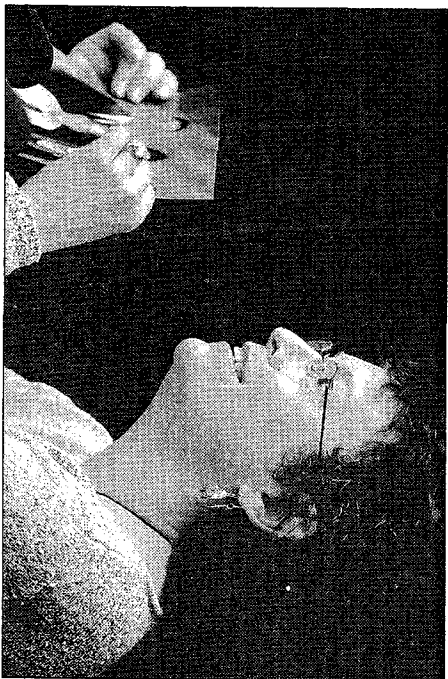
Ellen Coffel, who also would be cut from MinnesotaCare, came from Warba, a small town in Itasca County, to plead her case.

She said the MinnesotaCare proposal was like a personal insult.

"That was like a slap in the face," said Coffel, who at 61 is too young for health care programs for seniors.

Senators also heard from social service providers and the impact more trims or rate freezes might have on their clients.

Mark Peterson, president and CEO of Lutheran Social Services, said his organization has struggled to maintain services in the past two years given the restricted budget of 2003 and cannot withstand further



**Holding up a photo** of her family, Judith Blackford of Lake Elmo tells members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee that being forced to declare bankruptcy because of medical bills has been very embarrassing. Blackford has been the primary caregiver for her son, John, who has spina bifida.

restrictions. In the last two years, the agency had to close services in six counties and, for a time, shut down two shelters

for homeless children.

Peterson closed his testimony by talking about one donation that has helped the agency in the last few months — a \$1,000 check from a soldier serving in Afghanistan who said he was sending the money because Lutheran Social Services once helped him when he was young and homeless.

After Peterson's testimony, Sen. Paul Koering, R-Fort Ripley, said he didn't think reaction to the testimony should be a party issue.

"It has been a very powerful morning to me," he said.

Testimony about the budget in front of the Senate Health and Human Services panel will continue today and next Tuesday.

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