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**Lawmakers target drug epidemic in Ohio budget**

Threats to Medicaid could undermine efforts

One of the bright spots in the 2018-2019 Ohio budget is the concerted and coordinated efforts lawmakers made to steer more resources to stem the drug epidemic that has consumed communities across the state. But much of that progress could be undone if lawmakers make good on a threat to dismantle Medicaid expansion, which provides care for many Ohioans struggling with addiction.

In four “Budget Bites” released today, Policy Matters Ohio looks at how key programs to curb the drug crisis fared in the 2018-2019 budget: mental health and addiction services, protective services, alternatives to incarceration and Medicaid. Lawmakers increased funding for the department of mental health and addiction services by 16.4 percent, compared to the previous two-year budget. In response to more children being placed in protective custody due to their parent or guardian’s battle with substance abuse, lawmakers increased funding for children’s services agencies by $41 million or 36.8 percent. They also increased funding for alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenders. Community-based correctional services that include drug treatment and rehabilitation went up by 10 percent or $54.9 million, a move that could prevent 3,400 Ohioans from serving time each year and save the state millions in the long-term.

“Legislators were right to expand funding to address the drug crisis, and we applaud them for it,” said Policy Matters Senior Project Director Wendy Patton. “Getting addicts the treatment they need makes our communities safer and saves taxpayers money in the long-run. But many of these resources are not new and come at the expense of other programs like funding for local governments who are also on the frontlines of the crisis.”

Medicaid is Ohio’s largest insurer and has been instrumental in providing treatment for people fighting addiction. It provided $650 million of the approximately $1 billion dedicated to stemming the drug epidemic in 2016-2017. Coverage for all groups was maintained in this budget. But lawmakers also included threats to the program, such as a freeze on enrollment for Medicaid expansion which helped more than 500,000 Ohioans with substance use disorder and mental illness get treatment since 2014 Governor Kasich vetoed the proposed freeze, but it may reemerge: vetoes may be overridden until the end of the year. The budget also included provisions that may impose work requirements or new premiums for Medicaid enrollees, both of which are likely to decrease participation and prevent access to treatment.

“All the progress Ohio has made in curtailing the drug epidemic could be thwarted if people who need it aren’t able to get treatment,” Patton said. “Protecting Medicaid is crucial.”

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*Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute*

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