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Groups sue Sacramento County to halt mental health cuts

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Disability rights groups are asking the federal court to intervene on behalf of thousands of Sacramento County mental patients who may soon be forced out of their community treatment programs because of budget cuts.

The lawsuit seeking class-action status, filed Thursday in U.S. District Court in Sacramento, contends the cuts violate various state and federal laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, and would be devastating to patients.

If the services are eliminated as planned on June 30, thousands of severely, chronically mentally ill people "will inevitably be exposed to increased harm of injury and death," the lawsuit claims.

Plaintiffs named in the suit, filed by Disability Rights California, the Western Center on Law and Poverty, and Cooley LLP, are five indigent residents of Sacramento County whose programs are on the chopping block. Named as defendants are the county, the Board of Supervisors and county officials responsible for administering outpatient mental health services.

A county spokeswoman said officials had yet to see the lawsuit and most likely would decline to comment on a matter in litigation. Administrators previously have said they have no choice but to make wrenching cuts in an effort to cut \$17 million from their behavioral health budget.

Under its latest proposal, the department of Behavioral Health Services proposes cutting its ties with five programs that provide outpatient care to people with such conditions as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

The programs have been slashed by more than half during the past year, leaving area hospitals and private clinics struggling to fill gaps in care. If the current budget proposal passes, 5,000 or more patients would have to find care elsewhere.

To make up for the cuts, the behavioral health department has proposed expanding its Adult Psychiatric Aftercare Clinic and opening four new outpatient mental health "wellness centers" staffed by county workers.

Private care providers are sharply criticizing the plan, arguing that the proposed new system would cost more to run and disrupt care to numerous patients. The result, they said, would be more psychotic people going untreated, crowding emergency rooms, wandering the streets and committing crimes.