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<http://www.thestate.com/2013/03/17/2681598/budget-woes-could-shut-down-sc.html>
Adam Beam

The program that represents children in cases of abuse and neglect will run out of money, shutting down the state's Family Court system, if lawmakers do not give it an extra \$1.5 million, officials say.

"It would make the Family Court system come to a halt," Christine Glover, director of administration for the Governor's Office of Executive Policy and Programs, told a Senate Finance subcommittee last week.

Glover says the Guardian Ad Litem program needs the extra money in the state's fiscal year that starts July 1 or it will run out of money at midyear, next February.

But House lawmakers, who did not include the additional money in the \$22.7 billion spending plan that they approved last week, are skeptical.

"The decision on that one was a tough one," said state Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter, D-Orangeburg, a member of the House budget subcommittee that oversees the program. "We didn't feel that it would have that much of an impact because the folks who represent them in court are pretty much volunteers."

The Guardian Ad Litem program uses volunteers to represent children and make recommendations to judges in cases involving allegations of abuse and neglect, or motions to terminate parental rights.

But those "volunteers" have to have attorneys, and lawyers cost money, said Glover of the Governor's Office.

"That's news to me," Cobb-Hunter responded.

Glover said the program has two problems: more cases and less money.

In the past, a Family Court judge would appoint attorneys to act as guardians in about 30 percent of cases involving children, Glover said. The state's guardian program covered the remaining 70 percent of the cases.

But, in 2010, the state Supreme Court banned Family Court judges from appointing attorneys as guardians. As a result, Glover said the guardian program now has to handle, on average, about 1,500 more cases and 2,500 more children each year.

"We have over 700 additional guardians, and we have more hearings and greater attorney fees," she said.

Most of the program's money comes from interest on state tax refunds, money that has been decreasing as a result of the recession. Glover said the program expects to get \$1.8 million in the state's next fiscal year, about \$100,000 less than this year and about \$800,000 less than its previous high.

Glover said the program once received some money from the Commission on Indigent Defense to help pay for attorneys, but that agency has its own budget problems and has been unable to help in recent years.

State Rep. Jim Merrill, R-Berkeley, chairman of the House budget subcommittee that oversees the Guardian Ad Litem

program, said officials did not tell House budget writers the program would run out of money, shutting down the Family Court system, unless it received the \$1.5 million requested. “I have seen mind readers, but I don’t claim to be one,” he said.

Now, program officials are appealing to the Senate, which soon will begin building its version of the budget. Last week, Glover asked a Senate Finance subcommittee to include the extra \$1.5 million in its version of the budget.

State Sen. Ronnie Cromer, R-Newberry, chairman of the Senate subcommittee, said he “certainly hope(s)” the Family Court system will not shut down because of the Guardian Ad Litem program’s money woes.

“We always find a way to carry on ... even in the short years,” said Cromer, who has asked the program for more information on how it operates.

Cromer thinks the program is necessary.

“We all know there is a lot of abuse out there,” he said. “I probably will make the recommendation we do give them the additional funding.”

If the Senate votes to give the program the extra money, the House either could accept the change or fight it — forcing the two legislative bodies to work out a compromise before sending the budget to Gov. Nikki Haley for her approval.

Haley included the \$1.5 million in her budget recommendation to the Legislature, so it is unlikely she would veto it.

Read more here: <http://www.thestate.com/2013/03/17/2681598/budget-woes-could-shut-down-sc.html#storylink=cpy>

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