

The Joliet Herald-News

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'Voice for our most vulnerable'

By Tony Graf

April 21, 2011

JOLIET — A bus tour brought more than 100 people to downtown Joliet on Wednesday, rallying to urge Congress to save funding for social service agencies.

Proposed cuts are targeting programs that provide emergency food and housing assistance, mortgage and rental assistance, scholarships, small-business loans and utility bill assistance, said a local agency director who is working to preserve the funding.

Kris White, executive director of the Will County Center for Community Concerns, spoke at the rally.

“It is important that we, Community Action, make ourselves heard in communities to our elected officials — and out in Washington — and be the voice for our most vulnerable citizens,” said White, who also chairs the Illinois Association of Community Action Agencies.

White has been on the three-day bus tour with the association and its supporters, visiting Springfield, Peoria, Rockford, Waukegan and Schaumburg.

On Wednesday, the tour came to the Will County Office Building in Joliet.

The tour group is opposing proposed 50 percent cuts in the Community Services Block Grant and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program.

Local outlook

Last year in Will County, the block grant served 3,900 households. And the home energy assistance program served 9,400 households, with 1,300 households applying for help after having been shut off, White said.

“A cut of 50 percent (for the two programs) would in essence mean we could serve one half the people we serve now, which does not come close to serving all who are in need,” she said at the rally.

“If you look at the people who would be affected by these cuts, we’re talking about 2,500 seniors who may have to make a choice on whether to pay utility bills or buy their prescription drugs. It’s about 3,900 children who may not have the ability to come home to a house that is heated, and have no

electricity to do their work at night,” White said. “In a great nation such as ours, no one should have to make those choices.”

Dalitso Sulamoyo, executive director of the Illinois Association of Community Action Agencies, emphasizes the importance of these programs.

“President Obama declared in his State of the Union address that we shouldn’t eliminate programs that help our most vulnerable citizens,” Sulamoyo said. “Community Action agencies serve people who earn up to 125 percent of federal poverty guidelines — the definition of the nation’s most vulnerable. Now is the time for us, all of us, to tell our U.S. representatives and senators how vital (Community Services Block Grant) funding is to the work of Community Action.”

Support from leaders

Will County Executive Larry Walsh commended White, her staff and her board.

“She has worked tirelessly,” Walsh said. “Those individuals who need help, she does everything she possibly can to help them.”

He also commended “the compassion, the feeling, that the staff offers when people come and ask for help.”

State Sen. A.J. Wilhelmi, D-Joliet, rallied a large round of applause for the Will County Center for Community Concerns.

Wilhelmi said the issue is not partisan. Community Services Block Grant funding has received bipartisan support since it was authorized by President Reagan in 1981, according to the Illinois Association of Community Action Agencies.

“I know a lot of the programs we’re talking about were put in place under the Reagan Administration, and now we’re talking about the Obama Administration,” he said. “This isn’t a Democratic issue, it’s not a Republican issue — it’s a fairness issue, it’s a justice issue. It’s about standing up for people in need.”

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