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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**Thousands sign petitions urging Governor Crist and legislative leaders to save healthcare coverage for 40,000 Floridians**

**TALLAHASSEE, FL** – Florida's elected leaders received a message from thousands of Floridians today – more than 16,500 petitions urging Governor Charlie Crist and legislative leaders not to eliminate two vital Medicaid programs that serve 40,000 of the state's most vulnerable citizens.

Driven by ambulance and then carried into the state Capitol by gurney, the petitions ask Governor Crist, Senate President Ken Pruitt, and House Speaker Marco Rubio to save the Medically Needy and Medicaid/Aged and Disabled programs by tapping alternative sources of revenue. Petition signers are imploring Governor Crist and legislative leaders to:

Approve the use of the Lawton Chiles Endowment Fund;

Access the Budget Stabilization Fund or Rainy Day Fund; or

Authorize an additional \$1 per pack fee on cigarettes.

There has been some discussion lately on the use of the Chiles Endowment or the Rainy Day funds to relieve the budget cuts. Most recently, Governor Crist has stated publicly that the Rainy Day fund should be used.

Hoping to close a nearly \$4 billion state budget shortfall, legislators are considering slashing \$1.2 billion in health and human services programs this year – including about \$500 million in Medicaid reimbursement cuts to hospitals. That includes cutting nearly \$355 million in state and federal funding for the hospital coverage of the Medically Needy and Medicaid/Aged and Disabled programs.

"Cuts to these programs reflect a shortsighted solution to the budget deficit," said Mark O'Bryant, president and CEO of Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare, and vice chair of the Florida Hospital Association Board of Trustees. "With these 16,500 petitions, legislators are seeing just the first wave of Floridians who feel great concern over budget cuts that could prove life-threatening to many of our most vulnerable citizens."

The Florida Hospital Association generated the petitions in just one week after asking the hospital community and its supporters to speak out on the cuts. In addition to the petitions, about 42,000 e-mails were sent to members of the Senate and House Health and Human Services appropriations committees urging them not to cut the two Medicaid programs.

The Medical Needy program serves nearly 20,000 of the state's "working poor" and provides coverage to patients with chronic illnesses, catastrophic injuries, and organ transplants. The Medicaid/Aged and Disabled program – targeted by the Senate for total elimination – provides healthcare coverage for about 24,000 low-income elderly and people who are permanently or totally disabled.



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"Many poor and sick Floridians hope legislators will think hard about the real life and death consequences of cutting these programs," said Mary Ellen Ross of Delray Beach, executive director of the Florida Transplant Survivors Coalition. Ross has been in the Medically Needy program since 1999, when she received a liver and bone marrow transplant. "If Medically Needy takes the hit lawmakers are proposing, it will cut the only lifeline available to uninsured victims of traumatic accidents and catastrophic illness, along with organ transplant recipients. It could literally mean death to many of these people."

In the petition, supporters asked the Governor and legislative leaders to invest \$158 million in state funding into the hospital component of the Medically Needy and Medicaid/Aged and Disabled programs, which will allow Florida to draw down another \$196 million in federal funds already earmarked to help the state's poor and sick.

Tony Carvalho, president of the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida, called the Legislature's plans to eliminate or cut back on these programs a "terrible" mistake. Carvalho noted that the Medically Needy program is a "safety net for all Floridians" because it provides healthcare coverage to citizens who are uninsured or suddenly lose their health insurance, and then suffer a catastrophic injury or serious illness that drains their personal finances.

"None of us can be assured that we will not need this program one day, through no fault of our own," Carvalho said.

"Cutting or reducing these programs will create human tragedy after tragedy, as many of these patients will be placed in life-threatening situations," he said. "On top of that, when you consider that our state stands to forfeit tens of millions in federal matching funds, what this adds up to is not only hurtful, but represents a bad business decision by the State of Florida."

All Floridians will be impacted by the Legislature's Medicaid cuts, Carvalho said. Local communities will be forced to raise local indigent care taxes. More sick people will crowd into emergency rooms, increasing the amount of free care that hospitals are forced to provide and raising the cost of healthcare for everyone else. Additionally, health premiums will increase, making Florida businesses less competitive and adding to the ranks of the state's uninsured, Carvalho said.