

Faces behind the budget cuts emerge

AUSTIN — Our fellow Texans' faces emerged from behind the grim budget figures last week:

The young man who had a brain injury and no health insurance but was helped back to a productive life through state rehabilitation services.

The young woman with intellectual disabilities who proudly noted she's got a job, has started her own small business as well and is "most importantly ... a taxpayer." She was helped toward independence through early intervention and employment services (and she didn't miss the opportunity at a Senate Finance Committee hearing to tout her margarita-machine rental business for senators' office parties).

The mom of nearly 5-year-old triplets who detailed the autism treatment services that offer her girls hope for what she calls a more typical life. Without help from a state

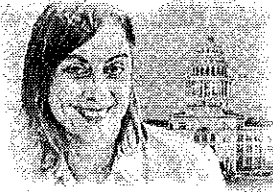
grant, the services would cost an out-of-reach \$5,000 per month per child.

The human services that would be slashed in starting-point, bare-bones budget proposals from legislative leaders are the kind of services we'd want to have if we were in their place.

None on the Senate Finance Committee took their testimony lightly.

Several Democratic senators urged those who receive services — and those who provide them, but might see their businesses close if rate cuts take effect — to rally an army of concerned Texans to weigh in against drastic cuts.

Republican leaders oppose new taxes, saying they want to preserve priorities within available revenue. Gov. Rick Perry has said he even opposes



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spending money from the state's rainy-day savings account.

Last week, GOP senators advocated finding places to trim bureaucracy or scale back more-stringent-than-necessary rules that make it more costly to provide services. No one's demonstrated enough bureaucratic savings to close a budget gap estimated at \$15 billion to \$27 billion, but at least one senator suggested that agencies confronted with cuts want to "lead with the stories they know make headlines."

"I'm not buying that we need to cut from the poorest of the poor ... and

I'm not buying that we have to raise taxes," said Sen. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, suggesting bureaucracy be cut. That drew a sharp comment from Sen. Juan Hinojosa, D-McAllen, about "campaign rhetoric" versus hard decisions.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, said he thought lawmakers could address many concerns without raising taxes. But if taxes are sought, he said, that effort constitutionally must start in the House.

"You spent a lot of time sitting here testifying to us," he said. "Our colleagues in the House probably need to hear the same thing."

Chances are they will. Hope Montgomery, the mom with triplets who was part of a story I wrote last week, wiped away tears as she recounted words from one of her daughters: "Don't give up."

Your questions

We asked for your ideas

about how to cut the budget, and you delivered. Now our Austin bureau interns, Bobby Cervantes and Nolan Hicks, are busily researching your suggestions. We'll post their findings here and on our Texas Politics blog as the weeks go by.

First up is Hicks' look at a reader question about how much extra revenue the state could generate by ending the back-to-school sales tax holiday. The tax holiday will cost the state about \$55 million this year.

What do Perry's office and a Democratic champion of the holiday think about the idea of ending it? Take a look online at Texas Politics (blogs.chron.com/texaspolitics).

Perry's proposal is due

Perry, back from his California trip that coincided with Texas' freezeaster (or as some would have it, snowpocalypse), is due to give his State of the State address and release his budget proposal Tuesday.

In 2003, when Texas faced a budget shortfall estimated at \$10 billion, Perry's budget zeroed out every agency because he said that "every dollar spent by government must be scrutinized to determine whether it justifies consideration as a priority."

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