Drug court advocate seeks fix for shortfall in treatment funding

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LITTLE ROCK — Just two months into the fiscal year, funding for drug court treatment programs has nearly run out and the Legislature’s chief advocate for the program wants an advisory panel to find additional funding.

State Sen. Bill Pritchard

Sen. Bill Pritchard, R-Elkins, said today he also may ask lawmakers in next year’s fiscal session to replenish coffers of imperiled programs considered key to newly enacted reforms aimed at steering nonviolent drug offenders away from the state’s chronically overcrowded prisons.

“They’re pretty much broke,” Pritchard said of the treatment programs used by the state’s 41 drug courts.

“If they need to send someone for inpatient treatment, there is no money for that, which is scary because the program has been so successful and is doing such a great job returning people to taking care of their families, working and paying taxes,” the senator said.

The Legislature this year approved an bill appropriating $1.5 million from the state Department of Community Correction for the treatment programs. But the funding was a casualty of about $30 million in tax cuts also approved by lawmakers, Pritchard said.

“Unfortunately, when they did the Revenue Stabilization Act” setting state spending priorities, “unbeknownst to me (the treatment funding) did not get funded,” he said.

DCC shifted some funds around and provided $500,000 for the treatment programs at the beginning of the fiscal year.

“Everybody is very concerned about it because they’re just out of money,” Pritchard said, adding that he has asked Wednesday for a meeting of the state Supreme Court’s Drug Court Advisory Committee, preferably next week.
“We need to look at this issue and see if anything can be done,” Pritchard said.

J.D. Gingrich, director of the Administrative Office of the Courts, said he received Pritchard’s request Wednesday and planned to talk with Chief Justice Jim Hannah today. Gingrich said he wasn’t sure a meeting could be scheduled as early as next week, but added one will be held as soon as possible.

Pritchard said he has also inquired whether Attorney General Dustin McDaniel’s office has funds from legal settlements with drug companies available to help fund the drug court treatment programs. Some lawmakers have been critical of McDaniel’s use of settlement funds without legislative approval for what some say are self-serving proposes.

“We’re looking under every rock. Where we go from here is to the Drug Court Advisory Committee, go to the judges, talk to the budget people, and of course the governor’s office, and see if that money is going to be forth coming,” Pritchard said. “If it’s not, then we’ll have to keep the hooks baited and in the water and if worse comes to worse try to deal with it in February in the fiscal session.”

Earlier this week, Gov. Mike Beebe said he is aware of the shortfall and is trying to find a way to shore up program funding. One possible solution is to dip into the Governor’s Emergency Fund, he said.

“That’s always an option, but I’m not prepared to commit to that right now,” he said. The governor said drug courts were a priority in the budget process, along with prisons and Medicaid, he said.

“That’s why there’s some flexibility in the budget,” Beebe said. “Obviously the more that you need for corrections to keep the violent folks locked up, the less you’ve got available for Medicaid or the less you’ve got available for drug courts,” he said.

During this year’s regular session, the Legislature adopted legislation that became Act 570 of 2011, Beebe’s plan for sentencing reforms and new guidelines aimed at lowering skyrocketing prison costs and easing prison overcrowding.

Expanding drug courts is a key component in helping to preserve prison beds for dangerous convicts, officials say.

“We’re just going to try and keep this issue out there,” Pritchard said.