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Disability advocates ask Alabama lawmakers for more funding

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By Hannah Lane, Reporter / Anchor CONNECT

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - The Alabama disABILITY Conference wrapped up in Montgomery on Tuesday. Before it ended, organizers made a call to lawmakers.

"People do need funding," said Josh Echols.

Echols is a member of the intellectual developmental disabilities (IDD) community and serves on the ARC of Alabama board.

He knows first hand the need for care and funding for those within the community.

"The need is so important," explains Echols.

In Alabama, there are at least 121,000 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Currently, only 6,000 are being served with more than 3,200 on the waiting list for help.

"You have to be in critical, dire straits in order to get services in Alabama right now. There are people on the list who have been waiting for years," said Terry Pezent, executive director for ARC of Alabama.

Advocates are calling on lawmakers to do something about it. It's estimated \$30 million would provide services for everyone on the waiting list.

Those with organizations, like ARC, are asking for the Department of Mental Health budget to at least stay the same and be increased if at all possible.

"It's hard for me to say, when you talk about more funding, it's hard to say until we look at the totality of the budget. I can't just say, 'yes we're going to put more funding in here.' I know that there were certain areas that we were pushing to make sure that we tried to at least fund to the level we did last year," said Speaker of the House, Mac McCutcheon. "We've got needs in public safety, we've got some needs in courts, there's so many needs out there, but this is a very important area."

McCutcheon says we are still weeks away from budget talks on the floor and admits money is tight everywhere, but he says funding for this area is top of mind.

He says whether you realize it or not, everyone is affected by it.

"If we are going to invest in medical needs, if we are going to invest in home care, if we are going to be investing in people's lives that have disabilities, then why don't we do it in a productive way to where they can get back out and have some sort of quality of life," says McCutcheon.

At least 350 people attended the three-day conference.

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