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Recovering addicts protest funding cuts

I Can't We Can to lose \$350,000 in city, state aid

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About 100 recovering drug addicts marched on City Hall yesterday to protest public funding cuts that will cripple a well-known recovery program.

Chanting the name of the organization, I Can't We Can, they drew the attention of City Councilman Bernard "Jack" Young, who said he is powerless to help but "stands in solidarity."

Other city employees stopped to watch the group pray and tell stories about addiction and survival.

Al Moyé, who credits the program with his recovery from addiction, said lives and public safety are at risk if I Can't We Can closes its doors.

"All these people here," he said, gesturing to the group, "they used to be drug addicts in the streets."

I Can't We Can is a network of halfway houses and clinical services founded 13 years ago by former heroin addict Israel Cason. As of July 1, it will lose about \$350,000 in city and state aid distributed by Baltimore Substance Abuse Systems. Cason has vowed to continue helping addicts, but he said he might have to do so in a more limited way.

BSAS said funding is being cut to I Can't We Can because the organization's state license has lapsed, its financial books are in disarray and conditions at some of its properties are unsafe.

"As sad as the situation is, they have inhumane living conditions for addicts in their care," said BSAS president Greg Warren. "They have no accounting for how the taxpayers' money is being spent."

Some properties have holes in ceilings and walls and are fire hazards, he said, and the program has "an egregious financial infrastructure."

BSAS will not reconsider restoring funding for the coming fiscal year, Warren said.

"We encourage them to apply in future years as they fix the grave concerns we have," Warren

said.

I Can't We Can employees and current and former clients are calling on city leaders to intervene.

When the funding cuts were disclosed earlier this month, the Baltimore branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People wrote to Mayor Sheila Dixon and City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake to ask for a city meeting "to address this life-threatening plight of this tremendous operation."

Branch President Marvin "Doc" Cheatham said yesterday that he had not heard back from either elected official.

"I don't know whether I'm more angry or sad," he said.

Dixon said yesterday that there is little she can do, because BSAS is a quasi-government agency outside the purview of her office and the City Council. But Dixon said she has her own concerns about the administration and money-handling practices of the I Can't We Can program.

"I've always felt they were a great organization, but there are certain protocols you have to follow," she said. "Hopefully, they will work on those areas and come back."

Through a spokesman, Rawlings-Blake echoed Dixon's desire to see the program meet funding standards in the future.

The protest got off to a rocky start outside the BSAS office at Charles and Fayette streets. Baltimore police issued a citation to Anthony McCarthy, I Can't We Can's chief administrative officer and former City Hall spokesman, for loitering and obstructing the building entrance.

"There was no reason to argue at that point," McCarthy said later, so the protesters moved on. Carrying signs saying, "I Can't We Can Worked 4 Me" and "I Can't We Can cleaned me up," the group marched down Fayette Street to City Hall, where they chanted and prayed.

A 23-year-old recovering addict who would not give his real name said he started in-patient treatment about five days ago.

If the program closes, he said, "it would mean devastation for a lot of people."

Young, who watched the protest, said BSAS should offer technical assistance instead of cutting the program's money. (Warren said he and the city Health Department had repeatedly offered to help the program but that Cason never took them up on the offer.)

The councilman said he hadn't delved into the details of BSAS' problems with the I Can't We Can program.

"They have changed lives, so they've done a great job as far as I'm concerned," he said.

"Look at all these people out here," Young said. "Not many groups can galvanize people like this."

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