

Local providers unite for those with developmental disabilities

By COREY L. TURNER
cturner@hcnonline.com

With little progress in the effort to avoid "devastating" funding cuts, facility directors and supporters around the Greater Houston area are uniting for the Harris County Families Unite Rally March 26 at Discovery Green in downtown Houston from 1:30 to 2:30 p.m.

As Texas lawmakers continue to address the state's \$27 billion shortfall, cuts to the Department of Aging and Disability Services threaten facilities that help those with developmental

disabilities.

Kim Brusatori, executive director of Kingwood's Village Learning & Achievement Center, is leading the rally, and Harris County Judge Ed Emmett will be among the speakers. Rep. Sylvester Turner has also agreed to speak, and Brusatori has reached out to the mayor's office.

Brusatori, who has testified at the Capitol, says severe budget cuts by the Texas Legislature will reduce services for thousands of people in Harris County. She says the rally is coming together because Harris County serves

the largest number of people in the state with more than 8,000 people currently on an interest list to receive care.

"Everyone is putting on rallies and we felt it was time for Harris County to unite since it is the largest area and serves the most people," Brusatori said. "We are just showing unity against the budget cuts."

In addition to Emmett and other speakers, several clients will speak on their own behalf. Among them will be Kingwood's Shane Hetherington, from the center.

Despite being born severely

premature and blind, Hetherington began playing the piano when he was just 2 years old. He is entirely self-taught and has performed at various public events over the years. Hetherington attends day habilitation at the center.

Brusatori said she hopes there is a large crowd of concerned citizens, individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities, families and providers at the rally to send a message to legislators.

"We are trying to put a decent program to highlight this situation," Brusatori said. "We want

our legislators to look for other alternatives and not just cutting services. We need to care and not just cut."

LOCAL EFFORT

In addition to the rally for providers, the Village Learning & Achievement Center is also inviting local residents to stop by the center through March 25 between 8:30 a.m. and 3 p.m. to get help with letters to legislators.

The center has set up a workroom and will help family members or supporters write personal letters to legislators, especially

those in favor of budget cuts to Medicaid Waiver Programs such as Home and Community Services and CLASS. Breakfast tacos will be served each morning, and pizza each afternoon.

Concerned citizens, volunteers, supporters, program participants and their families are encouraged to join in the effort to share stories about the difference the Village Learning & Achievement Center has made in their lives and in the community.

To learn more, call 281-358-6172 or visit www.villagelearning.org.