Opinion: The human face of proposed budget cuts

A recent day was normal for “Frank,” as “normal” goes for him. Frank is homeless and suffers from mental illness.

He lives in Aurora at Hesed House, the second largest homeless shelter in Illinois. Every year, Hesed House, through its staff and 6,000 volunteers, serves approximately 1,000 individuals, including 188 children. On this particular morning, Frank met with his substance abuse counselor, who has been helping him maintain sobriety for three months. Next, he spent time with his case manager, who is connecting him with community social services. He then had a session with his regular mental health counselor.

Later, Frank had an appointment with his doctor at Aunt Martha’s Health and Outreach Center, across the street from the shelter. He also met with law students from Northern Illinois University College of Law Health Advocacy Clinic, who collaborate with Aunt Martha’s medical staff.

HAC assists clients with obtaining government benefits, such as Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as “food stamps”) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. It also helps with Charity Care applications to help individuals with outstanding medical bills. Frank is working with law students to apply for Social Security.

Frank has a history of mental health hospitalizations but receives regular care and medication. He hopes if he continues on the right track, he can move out of the shelter.
While today was normal for Frank, tomorrow and many of the days that follow may not be for him or other homeless individuals if the proposed budget cuts offered by Gov. Bruce Rauner are implemented. These cuts call for a reduction of $12.7 million for homeless services. One program slated to be cut is Hesed House’s LIGHT-House Permanent Supportive Housing case management, which provides support for disabled chronically homeless individuals living in independent housing. If eliminated, many of these individuals will once again be homeless.

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, approximately 32 percent of the 14,144 people who experience homelessness in Illinois suffer from a serious mental illness. While Illinois already cut $113.7 million from mental health services between Fiscal Year 2009 and FY2012, Rauner’s proposed budget includes a $1.5 billion reduction in Medicaid, the largest source of funding for mental health services in Illinois.

How will these cuts impact individuals like Frank? It is unlikely he will leave Hesed House soon. Hesed House faces substantial cuts under the proposed budget, but at the same time will have stronger needs from the community for its services. The proposed social service cuts will also impact the agencies that employ Frank’s substance abuse and mental health counselors. Without them, his sobriety may end. The Medicaid cuts will impact the services provided by Aunt Martha’s, making it harder for him and others to receive medical care. If he is not seeing his medical providers as frequently, it will make it harder for the Health Advocacy Clinic law students to assist him as well.

There are many other individuals like Frank, individuals whose lives will be derailed if Rauner’s budget is approved. Many are individuals who have college degrees, who work, who are veterans and who are raising small children.

Frank will be the first person to admit that he made bad decisions in life, but he is working to improve upon them. Hesed House is helping him. Aunt Martha’s is helping him. The NIU Health Advocacy Clinic is helping him. His substance abuse and mental health counselors are helping him. Hopefully, lawmakers in Springfield will help him by recognizing how devastating the proposed budget cuts would be to Frank and many other homeless and mentally ill individuals in Illinois.

Colleen Boraca is a clinical assistant professor at Northern Illinois University College of Law. She directs the NIU College of Law Health Advocacy Clinic in Aurora.