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Area United Way urged to target prevention programs

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DALLAS TWP. - The head of the state's Department of Public Welfare urged local United Way decision-makers to watch carefully where donors' dollars are spent and focus more on prevention rather than treatment programs.

"Target those programs that get to people in their homes rather than in institutions," said DPW Secretary Estelle Richman, who addressed a luncheon Friday at Offset Paperback Manufacturers Inc.

That's the approach Richman, who oversees a \$19.5 billion budget, is trying to employ while dividing taxpayer dollars between mental health, medical assistance, family and other state-sponsored programs.

For too long, the cash has been put into places and programs that don't help to alleviate the bigger problems, but merely deal with the results, she said. "We spend billions of dollars on putting people in places (such as nursing homes, foster-care homes and juvenile detention centers) that they don't want to be," Richman said.

State Rep. Phyllis Mundy, D-Kingston, attended the session and voiced her support, saying that for every \$1 put into preventative programs, the state probably could save \$7.

Robert Schaub, the United Way of Wyoming Valley's board chairman, also embraced the message, saying after the meeting, "The dollars are shrinking. ... If we don't apply them to prevention, we're not doing our job."

Locally, the United Way's "Success by Six" campaign, aimed at helping disadvantaged youths age 6 and younger, conforms to many of Richman's suggestions. The campaign targets infant health care, child care and school readiness, including attempts to get early diagnoses of dyslexia among preschool children.

In addition to her emphasis on prevention, Richman encouraged the United Way's members to "look to programs where results can be measured."

On the state level, for instance, she spotlighted the success of a Parent-Child Home Program.

The program, a literacy initiative aimed at children age 18 months to 3 years old, has been provided to about 800 families. Home visitors use toys and books to encourage interplay between children and parents.

"These trained professionals help the parents to realize their role as the child's first and most important educator," Richman said.