

only \$25 million." st with U.S. Sen. Robert Me- not be more stark. held a news conference in day, and came out blazing. or not, you know where he

wants to withdraw all U.S. from Iraq within a year, only a contingent to train He would station a larger ding distance to deter Iran es in the region from med-

Iraqi politicians need to s running out for them to n affairs under U.S. pro-

ould send a message to id. y be dead wrong about l could create a power is to raging civil war. It al Islamists to take power. it ahead of time could a tactical edge. Mene- sion that's at the dovish n party. urries some political risk,

, a Vietnam veteran who Kean at the Rutherford nocrat from Wood- ning toward Kean in the

pid war to get into," he hink we can withdraw

who is swimming up- e. A recent poll from n University found the eat. But it found that big lead were it not for

held overboard might ade a mess of things. whether Kean has any clean it up.

mn appears Wednes- e may be reached at m or (973) 392-1823.

squeezed on both ends — not poor enough to receive extra state aid, not wealthy enough to keep going back to taxpayers for more money.

Hackettstown has had to cut almost

years. Class sizes are creeping up, and desired programs in the arts are wanting.

Extracurricular programs like lacrosse or tennis aren't offered at all.

are we maintaining? Yes, and we're very, very proud of our programs," said Bruce Smith, the school board's president. "But they are not where they could be, and if you put it [See **SCHOOL**, Page 17]

multiple prescriptions from the doctor, who was not named in court, then filed them at pharmacies in Essex and Ocean counties. Between March 2004 and September 2005, according to his admis- [See **PLEAD**, Page 18]

State raises co-pays for teachers, government workers

Union questions legality of overhaul that would save \$32 million per year

BY DUNSTAN McNICHO
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

With lawmakers hoping to save billions of dollars by overhauling the state's health benefits program for teachers and government workers, union representatives turned out in force yesterday to resist a preliminary plan to trim millions through higher co-payments and drug-buying restrictions.

Despite the objections, members of the State Health Benefits Commission voted 3-2 to raise the co-payments more than 200,000 teachers, local government workers and retirees pay for visits to doctors' offices and prescription drugs.

The changes, which take effect Jan. 1, are designed to save state and local governments enrolled in the State Health Benefits Plan \$32 million per year.

But commission members deferred another proposal — to save about \$34 million annually by steering state and local workers to generic drugs and mail-order pharmacies — until January, to let state officials launch a public education campaign about the changes.

Both proposals had sparked vocal opposition among the labor unions that represent public workers. A representative of

the state teachers union, the New Jersey Education Association, said it is possible legal action might be taken to head off the higher co-payments.

"We're looking into it," said Robert Antonelli, the NJEA's associate director for government relations. "NJEA's looking into the legality of the whole thing."

That threat and heavy union resistance to the changes proposed in the health program this week give lawmakers a glimpse of the difficulties they will face if they seek [See **CO-PAYS**, Page 14]

Once homeless, they're now attending college

State and federal aid, jobs and Covenant House help them toward goal

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO
STAR-LEDGER STAFF



AARON HOUSTON FOR THE STAR LEDGER

Chante Louis, 21, left, Joseph Hall and Christina (last name withheld at her request) attend college through a special scholarship program.

Chante Louis became a mother, estranged from her family and homeless, all before her 21st birthday.

Since she went to live at Covenant House youth shelter in Newark six months ago, Louis has settled into a role better suited for someone her age: a working college student.

Louis is one of 325 students this fall whose college tuition bills will be paid through the New Jersey Foster Care Scholars program.

The program's popularity has

soared since lawmakers set it up with state and federal funds three years ago, said Mary Jane Awrachow, executive director of the nonprofit Foster and Adoptive Family Services, which administers it.

So far 520 adults have used the program for college or vocational training. Conceived as a service for young adults who "age out" of foster care, it also has helped homeless youth who may never have been wards of the state.

A growing number of its participants come from Covenant House New Jersey, which operates shelters in

Atlantic City, Elizabeth and Newark. This year, 73 of the 325 students enrolled, or 22 percent, are or were residents of Covenant House, said Jill Rottmann, its executive director.

"If I look back over the past seven years I've have been here, Covenant House is a whole new place, in large part because (going to college) is an option for kids. They can see their peers going to college and it offers them new hope," Rottmann said.

The Foster Care Scholars program requires students to apply for financial aid under federal assistance programs, [See **COLLEGIANS**, Page 18]

COLLEGIANS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

Once homeless, now they study

and the state pays whatever costs remain at public colleges, or as much as \$5,000 a year toward tuition at private schools. The aid can also be used to cover expenses such as books, fees, bus fare and rent.

The total budget for the program is \$2.5 million, according to state Department of Children and Families data. The average award was \$4,000 per student last year.

The scholarships may remove the financial obstacles to independence, but for the program to work, the students have to be willing to overcome the circumstances that made them homeless. And to find a job quickly.

"Our first priority is to stabilize the crisis," Rottmann said. "Their first priority is to find employment."

Some go to Covenant House after they reach age 18 and support from foster care ends, Rottmann said. Other residents ran away from home or were thrown out by their families. More than 70 percent of young people who go to Covenant House have been the victims of physical or sexual abuse. Many come in needing treatment for a mental illness or an addiction to drugs and alcohol.

"It's difficult to come from the streets and then within a few months have a job and go to school," Rottmann said. "But the vast majority are on the same page about wanting to get a job first. They feel dependent and don't want to feel dependent. They want to get a place of their own."

Louis said she logged 60 hours a week this summer as a baggage handler at Newark Liberty International Airport, and is scaling back to 40 hours while she juggles a full course load at Essex County College this semester. She's already looking for an apartment. Her goals are to regain custody of her 2-year-old son, Na'im, from his father, and to become an English teacher.

"The problems at home, and having my baby, got me off track,"

Louis said. "In a way, I feel like I am taking steps to be a better person, and doing what my parents and other naysayers said I couldn't do."

Joseph Alex Hall, 22, arrived at Covenant House after he tried making it his way.

The Florida native came north two years ago because of tension at home after he dropped out of a private college he and his family could no longer afford. He traveled for a while before eventually living with a friend in Atlantic City, calling the whole experience "an utter failure." Now he's a sophomore communications major at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

"Had I not come to New Jersey, I would not have come here (to Covenant House). Had I not come here, I may not have found the independence I was seeking. Now I pay my own bills," said Hall, who lives in an off-campus apartment and works as an office assistant at Stage Left, an upscale restaurant in New Brunswick. "It was for the best."

Some students, fearful of what others might say, don't tell the people they meet at college they came from a homeless shelter. Louis said a co-worker spotted her outside the Washington Street shelter and told other co-workers she must have "mental problems."

A 21-year-old Fairleigh Dickinson University student who asked to be identified only by her first name, Christina, said she's told only one friend she used to live at the shelter. "I don't want anyone telling the whole world my business."

Christina said she'd rather focus on her 4.0 grade point average — the first time in her life she earned such high marks.

Covenant House's education coordinator Gwen Ross, better known around the shelter as "Momma Gwen," said she hasn't seen the stigma stifle the ambition of her kids.

"They tell me, 'My mommy may not have made it, but I will be the first in my family to graduate from college.'"

For more information go to www.njfcsholars.org or contact Foster and Adoptive Family Services at 1-800-222-0047.

Another patient

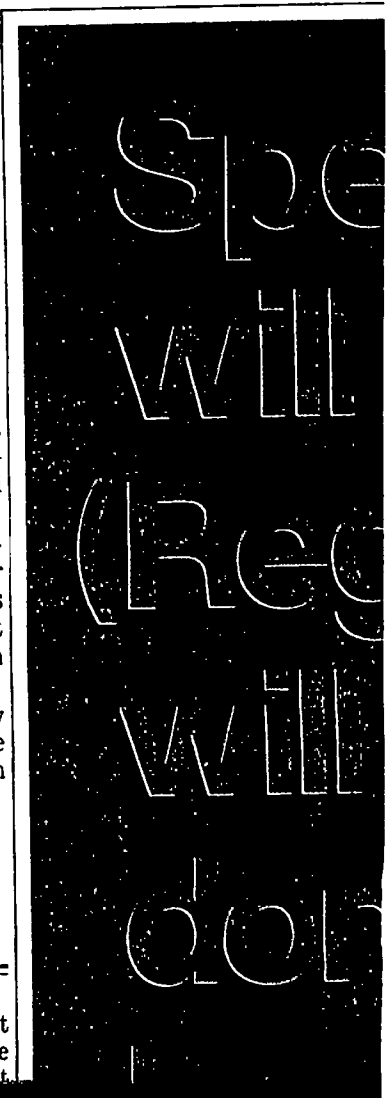
BY LISA CORYELL
THE TIMES OF TRENTON

A week after state officials announced plans to tighten security at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital, a mentally ill man left the facility's grounds in Ewing without permission, the 30th patient to do so this year.

While hospital officials said the patient, identified as Dexter Moses, is not considered dangerous, his escape comes as the hospital is under fire for what some see as lax oversight of patients, including the criminally insane.

"The fact that this is happening in the middle of efforts to increase security is unfortunate," said Ellen Lovejoy, a spokesperson for the state Department of Human Services.

"We're moving as quickly as possible to implement the security improvements we hope will prevent some of these walkaways."



PLEAD

But Bergrin acknowledged that Hernandez admitted selling the drug to others, not just acquiring it.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11