There may be relief for Ohio prisons in Gov. Ted Strickland's State of the State speech today, but advocates for Ohioans suffering from mental illness fear there will just be more pain.

Details of the Democratic governor's third speech to a joint session of the General Assembly and other state officials were a closely guarded secret yesterday.

However, a group of mental-health advocates who gathered at the Statehouse issued dire warnings about what they fear will happen to the fragile population if Strickland's state budget-cut mandates continue.

Mental-health programs have "taken a real beating" in three rounds of state cutbacks, said James Mauro, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Ohio. Advocates fear more reductions are coming in the two-year budget proposal Strickland will share Monday.

"When these cuts are in place," Mauro said, "people are doing to die."

Terry Russell, head of an association of small group homes that serve the mentally ill, said, "If we are judged by how we treat the neediest among us, we should hang our heads."

Russell said group homes get $28 a day for each person in their care. He said that is $1 less than he paid recently to kennel his dog. The $28 figure might be reduced, he said.
Sources said that in his speech, Strickland might propose changes aimed at alleviating prison spending, pegged at $1.7 billion annually, and overcrowding, which yesterday was 32 percent over capacity statewide.

Among the ideas discussed: equalizing disparate penalties for crack versus powder cocaine, diverting nonviolent inmates to community corrections instead of prison, greater use of electronic monitoring and time off for inmates who get educational certificates and degrees. Most would require legislative approval.

Terry Collins, director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, said the prison population yesterday stood at 50,600, slightly under the record set last October. Strickland has not informed him of prison-related provisions in the State of the State, or of final numbers for the upcoming budget, he said.

"I've long been an advocate of community alternatives. We have to do something different. You can still punish somebody without putting them behind prison fence," he said. "I captain a ship that I have no control of the cargo. ... I never get to put up a 'no vacancy' sign."

Mental-health advocates, including Ohio Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Lundberg Stratton, urged Strickland and lawmakers to avoid shredding the safety net for people in need.

Carolyn J. Givens, head of the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation and former director of the state Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services, said suicides are climbing as feelings of isolation and despair increase.

"Not another person should have to go through thinking death is the only answer," she said.

Stratton, a longtime proponent of mental-health assistance through the courts, said those with mental illness, as well as taxpayers, benefit from treatment before they end up in the legal system, a far more costly alternative.

With cutbacks continuing to erode services, prisons are often "one of the few places where they will get a bed and three meals," she said.

Officials said the cost of imprisonment is at least five times that of community treatment.

ajohnson@dispatch.com