

Steve Lopez: Kicking the elderly when they're down

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What a sad, surreal scene in front of the state building on Spring Street on Monday afternoon -- senior citizen demonstrators on canes and walkers, and in wheelchairs too.

Their beef?

The adult day health care centers that have been a lifeline for them may have to shut down in a month because Gov. Jerry Brown whacked Medi-Cal funding, and these elders can't afford private facilities.

We've stooped this low, folks -- kicking the frail and elderly when they're down.



"I don't know what we're going to do," said Mary Lee Nelson, a wheelchair-bound 74-year-old who said she spends four or five days each week at a Downey facility.

The seniors came to the rally with nurses and relatives to raise their voices in support of the roughly 300 centers in California, which have about 35,000 clients. As many as 85-90% of the facilities will have to close, according to Lydia Missaelides of the California Assn. for Adult Day Services, because the bulk of their clients rely on Medi-Cal funding of \$76 a day.

Missaelides said advocates are banking on a favorable decision in federal court in Oakland, where a judge is considering a legal challenge to maintain state funding and keep the centers open. A decision could be made within the next several days.

Seniors take their meals at these centers, get physical therapy and other treatments, and keep up their social lives, with transportation to and from home for those who have no ride. When I wrote about the St. Barnabas center in Los Angeles in July, I met seniors with nowhere else to go and loved ones who said they'd have to quit their jobs and become caretakers if Barnabas was forced to close.

At today's rally, Arcila Garcia, 75, told me she'll miss going to the AltaMed Golden Age center in Lynwood, and Kimberly Gomez, an LVN there, told me she's going to be out of work beginning Dec. 2.

Novella Moore, a 97-year-old client at the Long Life center on West 48th Street in Los Angeles, sat in a wheelchair holding a sign that said: "I am 97 year [sic] old. I don't have any family. All I have is Long Life."

The owner of Long Life, John Hekimyan, said the cuts might save a few bucks in the short term but cost taxpayers more in the long run, and Susan Galeas of the Alzheimer's Assn. echoed his concerns. She said without close monitoring at the day care centers, more seniors are expected to end up in emergency rooms and nursing homes.

We all know times are tough and lots of sacrifices have to be made. But is this the kind of budget-trimming -- a Scrooge-like blow that's neither humane nor fiscally sound -- that anyone can support?

-- Steve Lopez

Photo: Novella Moore protests budget cuts to adult day services. Credit: Corey Bridwell / KPCC