

Closure of Novato adult care center would send many seniors to costly nursing homes

By Richard Halstead
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Maxine Laidlaw of Novato says her 92-year-old mother will no longer be able to live with her if the state eliminates Medi-Cal funding for adult day health care.

"What would happen is that she would go to a convalescent home," said Laidlaw, 62, who operates a modest remodeling business during the day to support herself.

Her mother, Angela Laidlaw, suffers from dementia and requires round-the-clock care. She spends most of her day, five days a week, at LifeLong Medical Care in Novato, which provides adult day health care to 60 Marin seniors. The state-licensed center — like more than 300 across California — would be forced to close if the Legislature follows through on Gov.

Jerry Brown's proposal to eliminate Medi-Cal funding for adult day health care.

Holly Rylance, program director at the facility, said many of the families she deals with are

in the same situation as the Laidlaws. Rylance surveyed the families and determined that closure of the center — the only one of its kind in the county — would mean 20 of her facility's seniors would need to be institutionalized within 30 days and another 20 would have to be sent to a nursing home within 60 to 90 days.

"That's how frail a population we're talking about," Rylance said.

She also said it is possible that a shortage of nursing home beds could result in Marin residents being sent out of county.

A study prepared

last year by the Lewin Group, a health services consultant, warned that elimination of the adult day health program would result in a shift of 14,000 people into nursing homes at a cost to taxpayers of \$93.4 million. The study was prepared when former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger previously proposed cutting funding to adult day health care.

The California Association for Adult-Day Services estimates that a year of adult day health care costs about \$11,400, compared with \$60,000 for a nursing home. The Lewin study also found that elimination of the program would result in an additional \$43

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million in spending for Medi-Cal home and community-based services.

"It's not a cost savings," Rylance said. "It's a cost shift."

She said about 85 percent of the seniors served at the center rely on Medi-Cal funding. A few receive scholarships due to a \$250,000 Marin Community Foundation grant issued in December. Half of the grant will be spent to fix the center's roof and make other capital improvements, Rylance said.

Chryse Hawes, whose mother, Mary Grecoucis, 92, attends the center five days a week, said, "It gives us time to go out and be able to do things. We can't leave her alone for too long."

Hawes' mother is wheelchair-bound due to degenerative joint disease and suffers from dementia.

"So she doesn't talk that much," Hawes said, "but I can tell she really, really enjoys going there. Every day when I give her bath she asks me, 'Can I go out today?'"

Pam Covillo of Sonoma said the Novato center provides her daughter Alisa Covillo, 34, who suffers from a rare form of early

onset dementia, with badly needed stimulation.

"Without it, her cognitive abilities would deteriorate more rapidly. It's a huge deal for her," Covillo said.

The elder Covillo, who herself suffers from lupus, said, "There is no physical way I could care for my daughter 24 hours a day."

If the Novato center is forced to close it would also mean the elimination of the equivalent of 12 full-time jobs. The services of four contract employees — a speech therapist, dietitian, occupational therapist and physical therapist — would also no longer be required.

One of the employees who would lose their job is Teresa Remollino, 54, whose mother Severina Nad, 74, receives care at the center five days a week.

Remollino said her job supplies a major part of her family's income. Her husband works parttime as an airport security officer.

Without Medi-Cal funded adult day health care, Remollino would be forced to choose between looking for another job and caring for her mother fulltime.

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"It's really bothering me," Remollino said.
"Every night I've been praying so hard."

most vulnerable."

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The Lewin Group study predicted that if the adult day health care program were eliminated, many family caregivers would be forced to either quit their jobs or reduce work hours to care for their family member. The study estimated that that would result in \$10 million to \$15 million in lost income tax revenue and \$5 million in lost sales tax revenue due to reduced spending by family caregivers.

Lydia Missaelides, executive director of the California Association of Adult Day Services, said the Novato center's situation is not unique.

"Most of the adult day health centers across the state would have to close," Missaelides said.

The Lewin Group estimated that if the state's 310 adult day health care centers closed, 7,600 workers would lose their jobs leading to a decrease in tax revenue of \$7.6 million and a \$543,000 reduction in sales tax revenue.

Laidlaw said she understands that legislators have to balance the budget but added, "I don't think it should be at the expense of the

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