

State budget cuts threaten day programs for thousands of seniors and the disabled

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State budget cuts that go into effect Dec. 1 will eliminate funding for day programs for thousands of seniors and the disabled, creating angst among relatives who say their lives will be turned upside down.

Some fear they will have to send their elders to institutions. Others worry they will need to quit jobs to care for them.

Unless a pending lawsuit blocks the plan, the state will halt \$169 million in annual Medi-Cal funding for 35,000 people in 287 adult day health care programs throughout California, jeopardizing many of the programs.

Twenty-three centers have closed this year. Three others have announced plans to shut down by the end of this month, said Lydia Missaelides, executive director of the California Association for Adult Day Services.

Missaelides blames the financial uncertainty for most of the closures. She notes that other centers are on the edge, waiting to see what happens.

The Grace Adult Day Health Care Center in Sunnyvale will close if the cuts go through since nearly all its 200 participants are on Medi-Cal, said co-owner Manooch Pouransari.

Pouransari said he surveyed families in June and concluded that if the program closes, 68 people almost immediately would go to a nursing home or Alzheimer's center "because there's really no way they can live on their own."

"Everyone knows that there is absolutely, positively no replacement service for adult day health care," Pouransari said.

State leaders do see alternatives. They are moving to transition people into Medi-Cal managed care plans and say they will expand programs that help coordinate care and provide in-home services and other support.

"Our top goal is to make sure recipients are transferred into services that meet their needs and allow them to remain in the community," said Norman Williams, spokesman for the California Department of Health Care Services. "We want to do this right."

Family members complain that none of the state's alternatives offer recreational activities and a place for people to gather.



Activity Director Darlene Tripp, left, dances with Virginia Peach, center, as Sheli Cryderman plays piano during a song and dance activity at the Mt. Diablo Center For Adults Day Health Care in Pleasant Hill Calif., Tuesday Oct. 11, 2011. State budget cuts that go into effect December 1, 2011, threaten day programs for thousands of frail and elderly seniors throughout California, prompting family members to worry their loved ones will have to be institutionalized or will endure lonely hours at home in their rooms all day. (Dan Rosenstrauch/Staff)



Shagul Yaqoobi does needlepoint during a craft class Tuesday Oct. 11, 2011 at the Mt. Diablo Center For Adults Day Health Care in Pleasant Hill, Calif.. State budget cuts that go into effect December 1, 2011, threaten day programs for thousands of frail and elderly seniors throughout California, prompting family members to worry their loved ones will have to be institutionalized or will endure lonely hours at home in their rooms all day. (Dan Rosenstrauch/Staff)

Participants, some of whom tear up as they discuss the changes, say they foresee spending lonely hours at home instead of enjoying the company of others at the centers.

"This is like our family," said 77-year-old Igor Trizno, a Walnut Creek resident who spends three days a week at the Mt. Diablo Center for Adult Day Health Care in Pleasant Hill.

"If we stay at home, we'll think about some illness," he said, speaking in Russian through an interpreter. "But here, it's like fresh air. I will so miss this program. I will have nothing to do, no purpose in life."

The adult day health centers were meant to be a cost-effective way to keep medically fragile people in the community, out of more costly nursing homes and healthy enough so they do not seek care in hospital emergency rooms.

Medi-Cal pays adult day health care programs about \$76 per day, compared to about \$173 daily for a nursing home.

People usually attend the adult day health centers a few days a week. The programs typically have nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, social workers, speech therapists and others to help meet health needs.

Activities range from arts and crafts to seated volleyball, singing, dancing, board games and current events discussions.

Ozra Mazidabad enjoys activities with other Farsi speakers at the Mt. Diablo Center such as needlepoint, exercises and English classes.

"Since my mom has come here, her depression is better," said her daughter, Masoumeh Razavi, of Pittsburg. "Otherwise, at home, sometimes she'd cry because she is lonely."

Walnut Creek resident Galina Zelevinsky said her mother, Raisa Staroselsky, who now has Alzheimer's disease, has gone to the Mt. Diablo Center for 10 years.

"She loves this center," Zelevinsky said. "That is the place where she feels safe and comfortable. They sing together, they play, they talk. They feel involved in life. It's very important at their age to feel there is a place where they're welcome. She feels loved and that means a lot to me. She goes there with pleasure, with joy."

The program gives Zelevinsky a break from caregiving and enables her to work as a paralegal, notary public and translator. But now, she said, she may have to consider other options.

"I don't want her to have to go to a nursing home, but if this program closes, it would be very, very difficult for me to keep her at home," Zelevinsky said.

The adequacy of the state's transition plans has become a matter of heated debate.

Disability Rights California and other groups have sued California, seeking a preliminary injunction to block the cut. They argue that the plan would deprive people of their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act by failing to do enough to enable them to remain in the community and to avoid institutionalization.

On Oct. 31, the U.S. Department of Justice made similar arguments in a document filed to support the injunction.



Aida Dealorb, left, enjoys a dance with staff member Hanifa Abdel, right, during a song and dance activity Tuesday Oct. 11, 2011 at the Mt. Diablo Center For Adults Day Health Care in Pleasant Hill, Calif. State budget cuts that go into effect December 1, 2011, threaten day programs for thousands of frail and elderly seniors throughout California, prompting family members to worry their loved ones will have to be institutionalized or will endure lonely hours at home in their rooms all day. (Dan Rosenstrauch/Staff)

The lawsuit, which calls the state's transition plan "hasty and reckless," is scheduled to be heard Nov. 15 by U.S. District Court Judge Sandra Armstrong. She granted a previous injunction blocking other cuts in the programs pending a trial.

This time, "it's the same basic arguments, the same people, the same harm, just to a more severe degree," said Sarah Somers, an attorney for the National Health Law Program, one of the lawsuit plaintiffs.

Some legislators, meanwhile, are now questioning whether the transition plan will save the state money or cost more in the long run. They note that Gov. Jerry Brown removed key support for the change.

In August, Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada, D-Vacaville, in a letter signed by 30 other Assembly members, asked state health care services director Toby Douglas to postpone the cut until March 31 so lawmakers can review the transition plans.

Yamada joined many of her colleagues earlier this year in voting to eliminate adult day health care as an optional Medi-Cal benefit. She said she did so in the belief that about half of the money, or \$85 million, would support a scaled-back program for those with the greatest needs.

Brown later vetoed a bill that would have established the lesser program. He instead earmarked the \$85 million to transition people to other services, upsetting Yamada and others.

Williams argues that people shifted into a Medi-Cal managed care program will benefit by having a physician assigned to coordinate their care who can refer them to a network of medical specialists and share medical records with all of the doctors in the plan. The state will pay such plans an additional \$60 per member per month for those who have been in the adult day health programs.

"We believe it's a way to bring about better outcomes and also provide an important cost-saving to the state," Williams said. "Our transition plan will provide the medically necessary services that we believe will enable people to remain independent."

Other parts of the transition plan, he said, include expanding several programs that provide in-home care, including In-Home Supportive Services.

But Peter Behr, administrator of the Guardian Adult Day Health Care Center in El Sobrante, notes that the In-Home Supportive Services program may undergo a 20 percent cut Jan. 1 if the state fails to meet certain financial benchmarks. Other programs, he added, are at capacity or have waiting lists.

"If I sound angry, it's because I'm frosted as hell," he said. "The state says they're working hard to try and solve this problem, without offering anything."

Alameda County Supervisor Wilma Chan is among those who have been urging the state to maintain the day-care funding. "People just dying at home, it doesn't make any sense at all," she said.

Cutting out the Medi-Cal clients -- which make up 85 percent of the Contra Costa County programs -- could make it difficult to serve others who are still eligible, said Debbie Toth, executive director of the Mt. Diablo Center.

"How sad it is that we've come to such a place that we're only talking about fiscal implications," Toth said. —... Politics have cut people out of the equation. That's what's the most disgusting part to me."

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