

SM center hopes to survive cuts

From Santa Maria Times
Updated 6/19/2011 3:45:10 AM ET



Some of the approximately 60 people who participate in health services at the Wisdom Center in Santa Maria are most likely in their final months of activity at the North Broadway facility.

California's budget crisis and its decision to eliminate many Medi-Cal benefits already have forced some of the state's 309 adult day health-care centers to close and those cuts will force many Wisdom Center participants out of the programs, according to Program Director Betsy Whitaker.

"We're not quite sure what is going to happen," Whitaker said. "There will be a change to what we're doing here and it will be pretty dramatic."

Participants come from as far away as Lompoc and the Five Cities to take advantage of the center's services which include meals, exercise and therapeutic activities and physical and mental health care.

Most of those people could be unable to participate at the center if state budget cuts eliminate the adult day health care (ADHC) system.

ADHC facilities in the state serve approximately 37,000 elderly or disabled participants, often keeping them in their homes independent of full-time care facilities, Whitaker said.

The California Association for Adult Day Services (CAADS) claims 92 percent of adult day health-care participants rely on Medi-Cal for their health care and the centers depend on for their funding. Neither private insurance companies nor Medicare pay for the services, and few families or seniors can afford them.

Five centers have already closed according to CAADS and more are at risk because of the governor's budget plans to eliminate their services' Medi-Cal optional benefit.

In March, the state cut the program's budget from \$210 million to \$85 million. Governor Jerry Brown's May budget revision slashed that funding even further to \$25 million that would have essentially provided funding only to transition ADHC participants to other programs or out of care.

Legislators in both the senate and assembly took steps to help restore the \$85 million in state funding in the 2011-12 budget.

Assemblyman Bob Blumenfield (D-40th district) also authored AB 96 that aims to convert the program from a Medi-Cal benefit to one that operates under a federal waiver. It also provides for a transition period.

“That’s our goal is to have orderly transition and no gap in services for the people we serve today,” said Lydia Missaelides, executive director of CAADS. “With half of the appropriation we had there is no chance the centers are going to be able to serve the same number of people under Medicaid. It’s the cards that have been dealt in this economic climate. We have to figure out how to make it work.”

While that bill sits in a Senate committee awaiting action and the state budget hasn’t yet been worked out, the Wisdom Center has already begun making other plans.

Whitaker said if the state budget reductions eliminate the center’s participants, it will focus on changing its customer base. She said they will start marketing to veterans, whose benefits will still cover the center’s services. Only about 10 percent of their current participants are veterans.

She also said the center is already a licensed adult day care center, which could also attract different participants.

Whitaker also said her staff will pursue whatever grants are available and rely on its parent company to keep its doors open.

Open since 1999, the center is part of Life Steps Foundation, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit corporation that offers health programs to developmentally and socioeconomically challenged people throughout the state.

Whitaker said that support will help the Wisdom Center stem the funding tide.

“We’re hoping that will keep us floating through the transition,” she said. “I’m going under the assumption that we’ll still be here in 90 days, but it will be different.”