

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

Senior strains

10:00 PM PDT on Thursday, May 12, 2011

California is woefully unprepared for a disaster on the horizon -- the "silver tsunami." The retirement of the baby boom generation will put unprecedented strains on the state's fragmented and disorganized long-term care services. The Legislature needs to consolidate and streamline those programs to provide better services and save taxpayers money.

The state's Little Hoover Commission last month released a report detailing the bureaucratic confusion that now characterizes long-term care services in California. The report recommends consolidation of more than three dozen programs -- including in-home care and adult day care, assisted living and adult protective services -- now spread over seven departments.

As it is, the maze of programs is so uncoordinated the state has no reliable means of gauging what recipients want, what benefits they receive, which services are used by whom, how much each service costs and which programs work the best, the report says.

The Legislature should start by determining just how much the state spends on these programs now. The only reliable figure comes from 2005-06, when the legislative analyst calculated that long-term care cost \$14 billion, including \$7 billion in state funds. But how can the state responsibly oversee these services if it does not even track yearly costs? Ensuring that the state spends tax money wisely and responsibly is a fundamental legislative duty.

And scattering programs across multiple agencies, with little attempt at coordination, is a recipe for duplication, waste and inefficiency. Merging these programs would help the state use tax money more effectively -- particularly crucial when the state has huge and chronic deficits.

Consolidating these services would also help bring more accountability to this large chunk of spending. Tracking expenses and identifying cost drivers is far easier when services are unified and coordinated. And better insight into costs and programs would also help the state set priorities for spending as baby boomers enter the system.

The senior population in California is expected to double to 9 million by 2030 -- growing to nearly 12 million by 2050, according to the report. This aging population is also living longer, many with chronic illnesses such as Alzheimer's Disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity and heart disease.

California cannot meet that challenge by running programs with little knowledge about how the state is spending money and no sense of whether programs are effective and useful. Ignorance and disorganization are remarkably poor platforms for constructing sensible -- or affordable -- public policy.

Tsunamis come without warning, but the "silver tsunami" is easy to predict -- and California has no excuse for not creating proper safeguards.