

Golden Umbrella Adult Day Health Care services on borrowed time?

Program faces cuts, but governor's plan may force it to close

By Alayna Shulman

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PHOTO BY ANDREAS FUHRMANN

Anne Rehberg, 72, walks on a treadmill Wednesday at Mercy Medical Center's Golden Umbrella senior day care program. Rehberg said she fought working out when she first started at the center.

"Then I realized that it was good for me so I decided to just go with the flow," Rehberg said. "They're really good to us here."



PHOTO BY ANDREAS FUHRMANN

Occupational therapist Karen O'Connor gives George Morgan, 72, a paraffin treatment for his arthritis Wednesday at Mercy Medical Center's Golden Umbrella senior day care program.

"This stuff here saves me," Morgan said. "This place has been a lifesaving experience for me."

Betty Barraza, 79, pushed her walker through the crowded lunch room of Golden Umbrella's Adult Day Health Care center in Redding on a recent Wednesday.

"They're closing the doors," she said with a slight smile as she approached the program's director, Kay Hudelson.

"No, they're not!" Hudelson replied, patting her on the shoulder reassuringly. "We're going to fight it!"

But Barraza knows the reality: Gov. Jerry Brown's plan to bar MediCal patients from the program she comes to as an alternative to a nursing home would disqualify almost everyone currently enrolled — and could end up shutting it down all together.

"It would be the death knell for Adult Day Health Care," said Lydia Missaelides, executive director of the California Association for Adult Day Services.

At Golden Umbrella's program, the only one in Shasta County, people 18 and older with disabilities meet up to five times a week for health services such as physical and occupational therapy, as well as to socialize.

"I don't think there's anything we want that we don't have here," Barraza said.

The program, which has an enrollment of 77 locally and about 37,000 statewide, is meant to keep people living independently.

"It's services for seniors to be independent, which all of us want," Hudelson said.

While the program faces severe cuts either way, Brown's original proposal was to spend \$85 million — about half the state's previous contribution — on a similar program that would serve only the frailest clients.

But after his May budget revision — which took that number down to a one-time \$25 million payment to move participants to other programs, such as In-Home Supportive Services — advocates are now pushing for Assembly Bill 96 to save the original plan.

While the Keeping Adults free From Institutions program would have much stricter admission criteria — with estimates that only about 50 percent of current participants would qualify — it's better than using programs that don't offer any kind of medical treatment, Hudelson said.

Caregivers with In-Home Supportive Services, for example, help people make meals, do laundry and bathe — but they're not trained physical therapists or nurses.

"They don't have any different skills than any other caregiver would," said Anna Champe, a community relations specialist with the Shasta County Health and Human Services Agency.

And without medical care, many of the program's participants would have to enter a skilled nursing facility, Hudelson said.

"Most seniors don't want to go to a nursing home unless they absolutely have to," she said. "They've worked for a living, they've paid taxes, and then they get this, you know? It's sad to me."

For some, it's already happened.

"Last year, because of the scare, we had families say, 'We can't do this, we're going to have to place Mom, Dad. We don't know what we're going to do if you're not here for us,'" Hudelson said.

Barraza, who stayed in a home while recovering from an injury, said she hopes she never has to go back.

"I wouldn't ask anyone else to go into them," she said.

For those who might have to consider nursing homes, even finding a bed in one of Shasta County's seven facilities could be a problem.

"In the north state, there are not enough beds," Hudelson said. "They would probably have to go out of the area."

Copper Ridge Care Center — this county's third-largest, with 125 beds — is full, with a waiting list of six to nine months, said admissions coordinator Sarah Keller.

At Canyonwood Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Redding, all 39 long-term beds are occupied, too.

Fortunately, Hudelson said, a good number of her clients likely would qualify for the new program, because Golden Umbrella uses strict admission criteria.

But only 15 of Golden Umbrella's participants aren't on MediCal, which means if AB 96 doesn't pass, the rest enrolled in the program would have to find another form of care.

Hudelson said the program likely would survive "for a while" with only 15 enrolled, but paying for 13 staff members' salaries and other costs with such a dwindled clientele would be tough.

"With that big of a population not being here, I can't say we would close our doors, but it would be really hard to run a program unless we brought in a lot of people overnight," she said.

Barraza said she's been preparing for the worst.

"I'm always afraid I'll come here and find out it's going to be closing," said the Happy Valley resident.

For her, the Adult Day Health Care program is about much more than just staying independent.

A typical morning there consists of "just sitting there and looking at each other, and all of a sudden busting out laughing," she said.

In addition to the physical therapy she gets for her back and leg, Barraza leads a weekly Bible study through the program and does crafts.

"I always wish the day was longer when I come," she said.

Barraza also gets help managing her medications at Golden Umbrella, which she often forgets to take on her own.

"If I didn't come here, I'd be probably back to square one, because I probably wouldn't do any of the things that I'm supposed to do," she said.

But she said what worries her most is that she might not be able to see her friends anymore.

"They're part of us, and then they're gone," she said. "I don't know which is worse, them dying or them leaving."