

As We See It: Adult day centers worth the cost

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The fragile elderly are caught in California's budget squeeze.

Adult day health care allows older people whose health would send them to skilled nursing homes, to remain at home while still receiving care.

But the service is threatened by the uncertainties of the state's budget situation.

Elderday is Santa Cruz County's adult day health center, operated under the auspices of Salud Para La Gente, a federally qualified, Watsonville-based health care provider. Elderday serves 143 people with an average age of 76; about 85 are there daily. Statewide, 37,000 elderly people are served in ADHCs.

The programs have been part of the state's Medi-Cal system, but Gov. Jerry Brown earlier this year wanted to end this reimbursement, and transition patients to more narrowly targeted home-based care services. While Brown wanted to provide \$25 million in state funding to ease the transition for patients, advocates for seniors say there are no home-based programs that can replace the adult day centers, which not only provide health care services and physical therapy but also give patients a chance to share meals and socialize.

Salud has been getting about \$76 a day for each client served by Elderday, with the state providing about half that through Medi-Cal.

Currently there are two proposals on the table that could help keep adult day care at least partially funded. Assembly Bill 96, by Van Nuys Democratic Assemblyman Bob Blumenfield, would authorize the state to submit a waiver application to the federal government that would reconfigure adult day centers into similar home-based programs and would allow the state to match federal funds dollar-for-dollar to provide the funding. Blumenfield's bill was passed earlier this month by the Assembly and has gone to the governor.

An additional proposal would provide \$85 million in the budget to keep the infrastructure of adult day health care in place. Unfortunately, this amount would only be about half what the day centers received last year, but it would allow some to stay open, even if the program is restructured.

Staying open is an increasingly urgent need.

At least seven day centers have already closed in the state, or have announced they will close because of the reduced Medi-Cal payments and ongoing budget murkiness.

While cutting spending in California is a budget priority, adult day health care not only provides vital services to our frail elderly, but is cost-effective, since the daily cost is far below what it costs to keep a patient in a nursing home or hospital.

What needs to happen so that we don't abandon seniors served by adult day centers? The governor needs to commit to the transition waiver. This will allow at least a portion of the program to continue.

And the state needs to adopt a budget so caregivers are no longer having to close down vital programs -- and so families won't have to wonder what will happen with care for their loved ones.