

Dangerous Cuts: Program's chaotic dismantling bodes badly

By MARIKO YAMADA

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Recent front-page Sacramento Bee headlines about tragedies in California nursing homes should be glaring reminders about the reasons California pioneered the Adult Day Health Care (ADHC) alternative to nursing home care 40 years ago.

If you are old -- or are planning to be -- pay attention, because this system is about to vanish as the Department of Health Care Services, facing severe budget pressures, is dismantling it.

It was in response to well-documented stories of institutional abuse in long-term care facilities in the 1980s that California pioneered Adult Day Health Care, a community-based, integrated health and social services program designed to keep frail and disabled persons out of nursing homes. Through the years, the ADHC daytime congregate care program has saved the state hundreds of millions of dollars in nursing home and emergency services costs by providing a safe, daily care setting for frail seniors with complex medical conditions.

In recent years, California's continuing fiscal woes have seen Republican and Democratic governors alike cutting this "optional" Medi-Cal program. Each time, advocates sued and the courts blocked the cuts. In fact, a suit to block the elimination of ADHC is pending now.

Gov. Jerry Brown proposed eliminating ADHC in his 2011-2012 budget. Assembly Democrats voted for the governor's proposal with the understanding that AB 96, legislation that provided for a "step-down" alternative ADHC program, would take its place. This new program, "Keeping Adults Free of Institutions," was budgeted at \$85 million, half the current cost of ADHC.

When the governor unexpectedly vetoed AB 96 at the end of July, it threw the ADHC community into confusion and chaos. With a looming Dec. 1 deadline to eliminate the program, the Health Care Services Department has started to shift ADHC recipients to Medi-Cal managed care and is contracting with out-of-state corporations to provide less reliable and more costly services.

On Aug. 16, I convened an oversight hearing of the Assembly Aging and Long-Term Care Committee on the costs and consequences of the AB 96 veto. The Senate Budget Subcommittee on Health and Human Services held a similar hearing on Sept. 2. The department continues to put a happy face on the transition plan, but the community isn't smiling.

Thirty-seven of my colleagues, including 35 Assembly members and two state senators, sent a letter to Health Care Services Director Toby Douglas on Aug. 24, asking specifically how DHCS will accomplish this massive service delivery shift in so little time. We also requested a delay in the elimination of ADHC until legislative committees could review the plan and evaluate nursing home capacity.

Just like the transition plan, the answers to our questions have been vague and open-ended.

Now, tens of thousands of ADHC clients -- mainly poor, elderly women -- along with their families and the 7,000 workers who care for them are slated to be cut from their programs and lose their jobs.

Of the 330 ADHCs in California, 21 have already closed, and it is unclear where their former clients have gone, because no one is tracking them.

There is no doubt that the destruction of the ADHC program will result in increased 911 calls, hospital emergency room visits, nursing home placements and investigations for abuse and neglect.

Demands for mental health care and in-home supportive services will also rise -- at a time when budgets for all of these programs are being slashed. Without safe adult daycare, working family members will either have to quit their jobs to care for their loved ones or place their family members in less appropriate settings--often, nursing homes.

Both Gov. Brown and I are senior citizens. My hope is that you will become one, too.

With an exploding population of baby boomers, persons with autism and Alzheimer's, returning veterans with disabling conditions and traumatic brain injuries, along with increasing numbers of impoverished adults with multiple chronic conditions in our communities, is this the time to take a wrecking-ball to a proven, cost-effective program serving our state's most vulnerable?

Will the courts again provide relief at the expected Nov. 8 hearing, three weeks before the Dec. 1 elimination date?

History will judge my vote and the governor's veto. But, unless we raise our voices now, we will all surely suffer the consequences.

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The author, a Democrat, represents the 8th District in the California Assembly, where she chairs its Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care. She now regrets her vote to support Gov. Brown's ADHC elimination proposal.