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Adult Day Program closing today

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Senior Center implores community to assist frail elderly

"Bingo!" calls out one of the lucky participants at what will be the last game of chance at the Ukiah Senior Center's Adult Day Health program.



Seniors sit quietly in wheelchairs. Others appear physically fit but have difficulty communicating - victims of Alzheimer's and dementia. For others who live alone or in skilled nursing facilities, this group of friends and caregivers is all the family they have. Today marks the final day of the Ukiah Senior Center's Adult Day Health Program. Staff members are doing their best to bolster the spirits of the attendees.

"Program funding was cut at the state level," explains Senior Center director Lavonna Silviera. The state's program was rife with costly and sometimes unwieldy regulations, says ADHC program director Donna Ford.

"The state required we have paid social workers and registered nurses on hand for specific numbers of hours, regardless of our client numbers," Ford explains.

Audits, licensing fees and other regulations added to administrative costs. Last year the program, which ran successfully for 16 years lost nearly \$25,000.

Despite the state's suggestion that a federally subsidized program will rescue beleaguered ADHC programs, Silviera and her board determined the best course of action was to close the Ukiah program.

"If it happens, criteria for this new state program will be so tight, less than half of our people would qualify," she explains.

"We decided to set our own closing date rather than being held hostage by the State," Silviera notes. Eleven ADHC's statewide have announced closure.

"Our program is the smallest to close. Centers with as many as 300 clients are closing," she says. Twelve senior center employees will be unemployed as of tomorrow.

Because the Center's transportation program was partially subsidized by the ADHC, senior bus service is being curtailed.

"We won't be running on Wednesdays but the bus will be running longer the rest of the week, from 8:00 until 4:15," explains Silviera. All other Senior Center activities will continue on Wednesdays. Silviera hopes to provide a full bus schedule later this year.

Ironically, says Silviera, the state required ADHC's to create discharge plans for each client.

"Referrals are few because other local agencies ... are experiencing the same cuts. There's absolutely nothing like this program in our area. Apparently the State accepts the fact that seniors are being referred to programs unable to provide care, but they've satisfied their due diligence," sighs Silviera.

"We were dumbfounded about what our clients were going to do," says Ford. "One client has been here for six years. We have clients whose family is concerned they will close their bedroom doors and that will be it."

"We are afraid there are three clients who may die within the year without the program," Ford notes.

The prospect of leaving these individuals with no means of support compelled staff to try to fill gaps left by the program's closure.

"We are creating an activity called The Lunch Bunch," explains Silviera. The program will run from 11 (a.m.) until 2 (p.m.) four days per week. It will include transportation to and from home, a delicious lunch and a guided activity," says Ford. Cost will be \$25 per day with a flexible commitment. "From our current client base, 15 individuals are interested in signing up," Ford notes. Ford is accepting applications from community members interested in the program.

The new activity won't offer the medical component of the ADHC program, but will provide much-needed socialization.

"These folks need to get out of their homes and have a daily plan. They need interaction with friends and peers, to have something to look forward to. This helps tremendously with cognitive abilities and physical health. Otherwise, people stay home, doing nothing," says Ford.

Funding the program will be challenging. "We have a cash deficit before we even start. We desperately need sponsorships for facility rental and particularly for clients who can't afford the daily rate, which we are striving to keep as low as possible. We need organizational sponsorships. We don't want to add \$25,000 per year to client fees," says Silviera.

Families are trying to scrape fees together. Some clients have no financial support.

"Right now we're doing this on a shoestring, with minimal staff. We are pleading for donations and volunteers. Donna needs all the help she can get," Silviera notes.

The program is slated to begin in mid-July, but that may not be soon enough. "Some clients are already so confused because of the changes, we're afraid they will be in skilled nursing before the program starts," Ford notes.

"One gentleman lives in a skilled nursing facility. His attendance was funded by a partnering agency. Because we will no longer be a licensed program, the agency won't subsidize the Lunch Bunch, even though it's one-third the cost. We are asking the community to sponsor folks who want to come and can't," says Silviera.

"Our mission is to help seniors remain independently in their homes for as long as possible. The old program had so much red tape. Now we have an opportunity for community to support community. This activity and our other programs help frail elders and active seniors stay connected, social, active, happy and independent."

Donations of food supplies for the noon meal are requested. For information phone the Senior Center at 462-4343. Donations can be sent to the Ukiah Senior Center, 499 Leslie Street, Ukiah, CA 95482, flagged for "the Lunch Bunch."