

California gets graded on long-term health care

By Kim Lamb Gregory

Posted September 9, 2011 at 7:56 p.m.

Long-term care for seniors and the disabled in California is ranked 15th in the nation, according to a new score card released this week by AARP's Public Policy Institute, the Commonwealth Fund and the SCAN Foundation.

Not bad, according to AARP California lobbyist Casey Young, until you look more closely at the categories and subcategories measured. Most of the areas in which the state scored well are being whittled down or axed by budget constraints.

A roadmap to improve state's long-term care

If California improved to the level of the best-performing state in the country:

- 30,145 more low- or moderate-income adults ages 21 and older with disabilities would be covered by Medicaid.
- 11,309 more new users of Medicaid Long-Term Services and Supports would first receive services in home- and community-based settings instead of nursing homes.
- 9,824 nursing home residents with low care needs would instead be able to receive Long-Term Services and Supports in the community.
- 7,796 unnecessary hospitalizations of people in nursing homes would be avoided.

Source: Long-Term Services and Supports Scorecard

California scored near the bottom when it came to categories like home caregiver support and quality of life for those needing care.

"We're clearly going in the wrong direction in terms of the characteristics a state should have," said Young, associate state director for advocacy for AARP California.

The first State Long-Term Services and Supports Scorecard measured how well each state delivers all aspects of long-term care in four categories: affordability and access, how much choice the client has about long-term care, the client's quality of life and care, and how much support family caregivers get.

Each of the four categories had a series of subcategories, totaling 25. In those 25 subcategories, California's scores were all over the map.

The state is No. 1 in the nation when it comes to the number of people with disabilities who get "consumer-directed" care, which means they get to choose who gives them care and how. But California ranked 49th when it came to the percentage of nursing home residents who are physically restrained — 7.9 percent, compared with the national average of 3.3 percent.

That concerned Young, along with the state score on the number of "low care" nursing home residents, which means the number of nursing home residents who wouldn't need to be there if there was some form of in-home or community care available.

"It looks like there's room for a significant number of people to go into the community if services were available," Young said.

The problem, Young said, is that Adult Day Health Care is being eliminated and there are severe cuts to In-Home Supportive Services — the program that provides in-home nonmedical care for low-income disabled or senior citizens.

Gov. Jerry Brown and state lawmakers have said numerous times the cuts are painful but necessary.

"What you have to do right now is make the best use of the resources we have," Young said.

This inaugural score card is designed as a starting point to do just that, according to Bruce Chernof, president and CEO of the SCAN (Senior Care Action Network) Foundation, which funded the two-year, \$850,000 study along with the Commonwealth Fund.

"You really can't improve what you don't measure," Chernof said.

Aging baby boomers and improved longevity is driving the need for all levels of government to figure out a way to accommodate the senior population, Chernof said.

SCAN statistics predict the number of Californians 65 and older will increase 100 percent from 2010 to 2030, from 3.78 million to 7.75 million. The number of Californians 85 and older should increase by about 72 percent in that same time period, from 628,000 to 1.08 million.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia were rated. Chernof said researchers were struck with the enormous variation in scores. Minnesota scored first overall and Mississippi scored the lowest overall, coming in 51st. Neighboring Alabama was 50th.

"The reality is, the South faces higher rates of poverty and higher rates of disability than the rest of the country," Chernof said.

The researchers also noticed common themes in states with the highest and lowest score.

Chernof stated the top five states spend about 60 percent of their Medicaid (Medi-Cal in California) long-term care dollars on community-based vs. institutional care, while the lowest-rated states spend just 15 percent on community-based care.

The score card showed the most successful states tended to direct their state Medicaid programs to serve more people in need and to offer alternatives to nursing homes.

They also established one resource center, a "single point of entry," to help seniors and people with disabilities figure out what they needed and where to get it. Young said California should study this closely as the state scored low in this area: 42 out of 51.

The top five states also offered legal protection as well as other support services to caregivers.

California ranked fifth when it came to legal and other support the state gives caregivers, such as paid family medical leave. But when polled, caregivers said they didn't feel they were getting the support they need, which could be emotional, medical or respite support, according to Young. California scored 46th in that category.

Chernof and representatives from the other two sponsors of the score card revealed the results in Washington, D.C., this week. On Sept. 27, a rundown of California's scores will be presented in Sacramento.

The original version of this story included incorrect information on the top five states' spending of Medicaid long-term care dollars.