

County preparing for worst as state funding for adult day care ends in December

By Melissa Evans, Staff Writer

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With state funding for adult day care slated to end in December, county officials are preparing for the worst: increases in 9-1-1 calls, emergency room visits, nursing home placements and investigations for abuse and neglect. Demand for mental health services and in-home care also is expected to rise.

Officials say the scale of the coming cuts is unprecedented. Roughly 23,000 seniors and low-income adults with mental and physical impairments in Los Angeles County alone will be forced to either pay out of pocket, seek other care or do without.

"To my knowledge, cuts to this degree have never been done before," said Steve Wallace, a researcher at UCLA's Center for Health Policy Research who has studied aging issues and long-term care for more than 30 years. "Nobody really knows what will happen to people when these services are terminated."

Earlier this year, state lawmakers eliminated Adult Day Health Care as an optional Medi-Cal benefit, saving the state about \$85 million to plug budget holes. The change goes into effect Dec. 1.

Advocacy groups have filed a lawsuit hoping to stop the cuts, and Assemblywoman Mariko Yamada, D-Davis, has proposed legislation seeking to delay the funding cuts. However, letters informing Medi-Cal patients of the change are being mailed this month.

Already, 17 of the state's 300 adult day care centers have closed in California, including two in Orange County.

At Family Adult Health Care Center in Lomita, a private facility that serves about 55 clients, officials hope to stay open.

"We're going to reach out to the community, hopefully get some more non-Medi-Cal clients," said Josie Chavez, program manager.

About 70 percent of the center's clients are funded through Medi-Cal, the state insurance program that now pays \$77 a day for services that include physical therapy, nutrition, exercise and socialization activities. Most clients come during business hours Monday through Friday, when family members or caretakers are at work.

The state has set aside \$85 million to transition some participants to a private managed care company, or to services such as In-Home Supportive Services, which pays caretakers to do nonmedical chores for homebound seniors.

Yamada, however, argued at a recent press conference that the state's transitional plan is an "ill-conceived and potentially dangerous shift in service delivery" for day-care patients. She and others hope to delay the cuts until at least spring.

The county, however, is preparing for the more immediate deadline in December, when thousands of seniors will suddenly be without a regular source of care.

"At this point we're not sure how this is all going to sort out," said Patricia Senette, a spokeswoman for the county Department of Community and Senior Services. "We're going to do a lot of outreach. We're going to try and let people know what services are out there."

The Board of Supervisors, citing a wide range of effects on county services, passed a motion Tuesday directing officials from three county departments to form a task force to begin preparations. Hospitals, clinics and emergency personnel all are expected to be affected.

County leaders also will explore the possibility of joining litigation to stop the cuts, largely due to lack of funding, to help counties pick up the slack, according to the Tuesday motion by Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas.

A large group of advocates and medical officials will also meet on Thursday at the Braille Institute in Los Angeles to discuss potential action plans. Among those attending will be officials with AARP, the Los Angeles Aging Advocacy Coalition and the National Senior Citizens Law Center.

Wallace, who will speak at Thursday's event, said California used to be known as a national leader in senior care. Adult day care was a particularly innovative and cost-effective program that kept seniors out of nursing homes, and allowed family members to continue working.

Adult day care, along with in-home services and other specialty care, "keep people living in their homes, which is where they all want to be," he said. "Over the last five to eight years, we've started moving backwards."

Attempts last year to slash funding for IHSS and adult day care were halted by the courts, but there's no guarantee that will happen this time, Wallace said. The next hearing on the lawsuit is scheduled for Nov. 1.

No matter the outcome, Wallace and others said the need for senior care won't go away; with baby boomers aging, the over-65 population is expected to double over the next 25 years.

"Demand is going to skyrocket," he said. "The system we've got now isn't the best system. It's been a very reactive process."

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