

State's in-home, day caregivers fear budget ax

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At 82 years old, Elaine Davies relies on in-home health care and other state-sponsored services, but not for herself. She's the primary caregiver for her 100-year-old mother and 73-year-old brother, disabled due to polio and mental problems.

Both her mother and brother qualify for aides to come to the home for 90 hours a month, and they receive additional Medi-Cal services and other programs as well. Her brother goes to an adult day health care center in Antioch, and her mother receives hospice care because of advanced heart failure.

But Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposals to manage the state's \$24.3 billion deficit, which include drastically cutting such programs as adult day care and in-home support, mean Davies and thousands of caregivers like her could wind up with little assistance.

Davies fears she could be forced to put both her mother and brother in institutions because she's physically unable to manage on her own.

"I feel both of them would go downhill very fast. ... I can't imagine either one of them would be able to stay at home," said Davies, who moved from Oklahoma to their Bay Point home in December after her younger sister, who had been caring for them, died.

California's health services, the second-largest part of the state's budget behind K-12 education, are expected to take a huge hit as lawmakers try to keep the state from running out of money next month. The Health and Human Services Department budget is more than \$31 billion, of which advocates estimate \$3 billion in health services is on the chopping block.

The projected cuts

Proposed cuts include eliminating the state's Healthy Families program, which provides coverage for 1 million children from families just above Medi-Cal eligibility; Adult Day Health Care, a program that cares for 36,000 Californians; and In-Home Support Services for all but the most severely disabled. Many of these programs keep people in their homes and out of costly nursing homes or mental institutions.

Other potential cuts involve reducing rates paid to doctors, hospitals and other providers to treat Medi-Cal patients, eliminating funding for various community health programs, and decreasing health coverage for legal immigrants. These proposals come on top of previously approved health cuts, such as the elimination of most of the state's adult Medi-Cal dental program and a \$2 per-hour wage cut for in-home health workers as of July 1.

In another proposal, the state could save an additional \$1 billion if the governor seeks and receives a federal waiver allowing the state to reduce Medi-Cal eligibility. Details have not been released on how and which recipients would be affected under the waiver scenario.

Even if all these health services aren't completely eviscerated, they are likely to experience severe cutbacks.

Nursing homes costlier

Health advocates deride the proposals as "pound foolish." The state, for example, pays \$76 a day per person for adult day health care, but putting that same individual in a skilled nursing home would cost upward of \$150 a day. Even with the proposed cuts, many of the people who receive in-home health services would qualify for nursing home care under Medi-Cal.

"Within 30 to 45 days, the \$117 million cost savings from cutting Adult Day Health Care will be wiped out by the cost of nursing home placement," said Debbie Toth, executive director of Mount Diablo Center for Adult Day Health Care in Pleasant Hill.

Toth said virtually all the programs she supervises would be eliminated if all the proposed health cuts take place.

"All of these programs have proven to be a cost-effective means of taking care of our elderly and disabled," she said. "They're going to take out that safety net and knowingly create a more costly result."

State officials acknowledge some of the cuts may lead to more expensive care down the road and that many of the proposals involve walking away from federal money that matches or exceeds the amount the state puts up. For every dollar the state spends on the Healthy Families program, for example, the federal government invests \$2.

State running out of options

But with California running out of cash as soon as next month, the state's options are limited, said H.D. Palmer, finance department spokesman.

"The breadth and the scope of this recession and the swift and steep drop in revenues that it has caused has forced the governor to put proposals on the table that would have been unthinkable just four short months ago," Palmer said. "The governor fully comprehends the human cost of having to put these proposals on the table."

Family on the brink

The potential toll means Doris Vasquez, 36, of San Francisco could lose health insurance for her three children, ages 6 to 18, one of whom was diagnosed with an eye disease and another with asthma.

Both Vasquez and her husband lost their jobs in the past six months, but her children have been covered for six years through the Healthy Families program because neither of their previous employers provided insurance. Vasquez said she's worried Healthy Families won't be there for them much longer.

Marveline Carrell of Oakland fears she may not be able to keep her 70-year-old mother, who suffers from seizures and dementia, at home if she loses the network of support provided by the state. Carrell works as a legal secretary and also cares for her two teenage children.

Her mother goes daily to an adult day care center in Berkeley run by Alzheimer's Services of the East Bay, where medical professionals are available to tend to her in an emergency.

"She's happy to get up (in the morning) and interact with the people she's bonded with," Carrell said, adding that her mother relies on multiple programs including paratransit services. "They want to pull away all that and put her in a skilled nursing facility where she'll be put in front of a TV all day?"

At 38, Michelle Rousey is younger than many of those directly affected by the cuts. But the Oakland woman uses a wheelchair because her severe asthma permanently damaged her lungs and long-term medications to treat the disease destroyed her bones.

'We're the most vulnerable'

Rousey, who heads the public advisory board for In-Home Support Services in Alameda County, said she understands the state must reduce its spending but questions how much of the burden can be borne by California's frailest and sickest.

"We're the most vulnerable, and we want to keep ourselves out of institutional settings that would cost the state more," she said. "But if they're going to keep pushing us toward an institutional base, they're going to lose life because there are not enough nursing homes for us to go to."

Proposed cuts

Here are a few California health programs that may be trimmed:

Healthy Families: Eliminating this program for children from families just above Medi-Cal income eligibility would save about \$369 million in fiscal year 2009-10 but end coverage for up to 1 million. Another proposal would reduce income eligibility from 250 percent to 200 percent of the federal poverty level, saving about \$54.5 million but dropping 225,000 children from the program.

Adult Day Health Care: Cutting the program could save about \$117 million, but its 36,000 clients could lose services. Advocates estimate that up to 6,500 employees at the more than 300 centers statewide would lose their jobs.

In-Home Support Services: The governor's plan would drop in-home support health care for all but the most severely disabled of the service's 462,000 recipients. That means services will be retained for just 36,000 people who cannot move or breathe without the help of machinery. The proposed cut would result in a state savings of as much as \$616 million.

Other special programs: Eliminating programs such as the Multipurpose Senior Service Program, which manages care for seniors who would otherwise be placed in nursing homes, and Linkages, a program that serves younger, disabled adults at risk of being institutionalized, could save the state \$25.2 million but affect more than 18,000 people.

Sources: California Department of Finance, California Association for Adult Day Services, Health Access, State Department on Aging, Institute on Aging

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