

Hudson Valley

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Report shows years of cuts taking toll on senior healthcare

BY CHRIS MILLER

With the state's 2008 budget process underway, the consequences for seniors of past budgets need to be kept in mind by New York's leaders. Long-term care representatives are convinced that state budget cuts to Medicaid will threaten senior healthcare quality and reform.

According to a new report from New York Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (NYAHS), annual Medicaid cuts to nursing homes and home care have put the state's long-term care system in jeopardy of providing less access to the seniors it serves.

"At a time when 6 million New Yorkers of the Baby Boom generation are poised to begin aging into the system, now is not the time to make cuts that impact the elderly and disabled consumers who rely on the state's long-term healthcare system," said Carl Young, NYAHS's President. "Providers understand that the state is dealing with a large deficit, but sacrificing the needs of seniors is not the best strategy to accomplish the goal of fiscal stability."

Every fiscal cycle, Medicaid is a large focus of New York State's budget. According to David Gentner, Chief Operations Officer of the Wartburg Adult Care Community, from the not-for-profit healthcare facility perspective, they care for the communities most frail and compromised seniors – comprising 85 percent of the facility's resident population.

The 2007 – 2008 state budget cut \$114 million from the Medicaid nursing home funding. Due to the cuts, one in ten nursing homes are considering closure. Nearly one-third of nursing homes surveyed delayed filling vacant direct resident staff care positions. 23 percent of homes were put in the position to cut direct care staff

positions.

Gentner noted there would always be a need for chronic care and services in a



skilled environment. He said once the cuts become too deep in that realm, funding for a facility's programs and services would not be available.

"You'll see older buildings and older models of care when, in fact, we live our lives in this industry to provide better models, better services, and better environments for the elderly to live in," he said.

Talks of state budget cuts to Medicaid have already impacted many facilities in the lower Hudson Valley region. It has been reported that hundreds of beds have already been lost in Westchester County due to not-for-profit adult healthcare facilities downsizing or closing.

Last cycle, it is believed that an estimated 2,700 certified nurse aides have lost their jobs due to the state's Medicaid budget cuts. Plans that promote resident-centered care, called "culture change" plans are being delayed or cancelled due to Medicaid cuts, while 17 percent of nursing homes are cutting back plans to

make alternative care programs, such as home care, available.

"(Medicaid budget cuts) really puts the whole industry at risk. We want to add additional staff and have more amenities and invest more in the plant than the operation. Our goal is to do more with what we have," explained Gentner. "So, it certainly slows and challenges our abilities to do more."

The NYAHS stated that additional Medicaid cuts would lead to further staffing and program cuts. Long-term care representatives believe the state's cuts will not only affect senior's access to quality care, but it will affect senior's quality of life and interfere with efforts to create a more person-centered healthcare system.

"Everyone would say when your operational budget is cut that you're not going to be able to provide as much as you would like to, concerning the care and services to the residents. We don't want to provide just minimum standards," said Gentner. "We want to be able to provide more services and amenities and direct care to enhance the quality of life for the residents."

According to Young, New York State made great strides towards a more flexible healthcare system when it approved changes to the state's nursing home reimbursement methodology back in 2006.

"Part of that commitment was to stabilize nursing homes' finances to enable them to transition to other forms of care, such as home care and assisted living," he explained. "Our seniors deserve these options, tax-payers deserve the long-term savings that reform can provide, and our members are ready to work with the state to effect that change."