



State Cuts Send Foster Families Scrambling Foster care, senior health services face 10% reductions

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Nonprofit health care and social service organizations that receive state funding are scrambling to reduce costs and find private donors to offset 10 percent program cuts already agreed upon by the Legislature and Governor Schwarzenegger.

Despite the absence of a balanced budget deal in Sacramento, there's little hope among those organizations that an eventual compromise will restore the targeted funding.

For Walden Family Services, which provides foster child care and counseling services in San Diego and three other Southern California cities, that means reductions in reimbursements to some 220 parents serving a caseload of 280 children on an annual budget of about \$9 million.

The state reimbursements range from just over \$400 to almost \$1,500 per month, depending on a foster child's age, needs and behavioral profile.

Stela Gonzalez, who along with her husband has cared for nine foster children over the years, says she'll have to dip in to family funds to make up for the 10 percent cut in her reimbursements.

She says she doesn't want to shortchange the kids when it comes to discretionary spending.

"They expect -- like all the other kids in school -- to be able to go and see a movie, to go bowling ... to play soccer or go to dance class," Gonzalez explained. "These things are covered by us -- not with reimbursements."

Karny Stefan, chief executive officer of Walden Family Services, says Sacramento doesn't seem to understand the long-term economic benefits of foster care.

"I mean, taking care of a kid in foster care is the inexpensive part," Stefan said. "If you don't take care of them well, these are going to be your future inmates. And they're going to be clogging the judicial system. They're going to be your homeless people."

A similar dynamic is playing out at adult day health care centers, which receive a mix of federal and state funding plus private payments and long-term care insurance.

Marie Dela Cruz, administrator of a center for senior citizens in Mira Mesa, says the 10 percent state funding cut would require the organization to cut staff as well as expenses for two daily meals, health care services, transportation and other programs for an average of about 80 visitors a day.

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Many of the seniors have chronic ailments, and might wind up being referred to more costly hospital and nursing home care.

"If we don't have enough staff for them," Dela Cruz said, "we cannot take the risk of having them here and not getting the necessary care and supervision."

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