

Budget impacts home-care workers

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The state's In-Home Supportive Services Program faces losing half its funding this year based on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's May revise of the state budget and advocates for persons with disabilities and the elderly are sending out a warning that the cuts could be disastrous for home-care workers and the families they serve.

Schwarzenegger proposed to cut an additional \$637.1 million from the program this year as the state attempts to bridge a more than \$19 billion deficit.

The program is vital for those with severe medical conditions or disabilities that may limit mobility or affect speech, for instance.

South San Francisco resident Sonia Lopez cannot survive without her home-care worker. Lopez, 64, was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis nearly 20 years ago. ALS, or Lou Gehrig's Disease, impacts nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord that control voluntary muscle movement.

She has benefited from the state's supportive services program but nearly lost her home-care worker of four years after the state changed the method for calculating the income eligibility of persons who are elderly or suffer from a disability.

The new formula would have required Lopez and her husband to spend an additional \$883 a month out of their monthly retirement to keep the home-care worker. The Lopezes' monthly salary is less than \$2,000, however.

Lopez's condition makes it hard for people to understand her and she has been stuck in a wheelchair for years. It can be incredibly frustrating for her to communicate with family and friends but her home-care worker, Clara Najarro, has spent so much time with her over the years that Lopez is able to express her needs to Najarro.

The simple act of eating or going to the bathroom are impossible for Lopez to do by herself.

Fortunately, Lopez's daughter, Julie Rosas, stepped in and found help for her mother and Najarro.

Rosas, who works in the city manager's office in Redwood City, picked up a guide the city prints with the names and numbers of important contacts in the community, including the county's Health Services Agency and other various county departments to find help.

"I called practically every number in the book," Rosas said. "I heard the same thing again and again. 'That's the way it is.'"

There was one number in the book that offered the family help, however, The Legal Aid Society of San Mateo County.

Tricia Vinson, a directing attorney at the nonprofit agency, had Lopez and her husband purchase a small private health insurance policy that could be deducted from their income so she could qualify to keep her home-care worker at no cost. The idea worked and the service

was restored late last year.

Najarro knew something was amiss, however, when she went to get her check from the county in January and it was \$883 short.

“She was told that Sonia would have to pay that amount to her directly,” Vinson said.

When Vinson called to find out what was going on, the county explained that although Lopez was eligible for free IHSS in January, the computer had already been changed to reflect the incorrect \$883 share of cost and they weren’t allowed to refund her the underpayment.

Vinson then requested a hearing before an administrative law judge. A few weeks ago, the judge issued a decision requiring the county to refund the underpayment and assure that Lopez received her home-care services for free, Vinson said.

With more state budget cuts looming, Lopez hopes she does not have to go through the same turmoil she went through last year.

“The crazy thing is that these cuts are not just inhumane, they are also financially irresponsible,” Vinson said. “This program keeps elderly and disabled people living in dignity in their own homes at a far smaller expense than it would cost to place them in institutions. It’s a win-win program, and one we should be promoting.”

The Legal Aid Society of San Mateo County is a nonprofit agency that relies on donations to survive. For more information check out its website at: www.legalaidsmc.org.

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