



Cuts to Caretaker Salaries Will Hurt Elderly, Too

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Editor's Note: Amid California's dizzying budget crisis, thousands of caregivers for low-income elderly and disabled people await their fate. This week, state officials will decide whether to cut \$78 million from the In-Home Supportive Services program, slashing caregivers' salaries to \$20,000 a year. Many say they can't afford to live on that amount and will be forced to look for other jobs. Advocates for the elderly fear massive the state's most vulnerable residents will be left to fend for themselves. NAM staff reporter Leslie Casimir reports.

It seems like Eleonor Dalapit always has to reinvent herself. A year after terrorists hijacked planes and struck the World Trade Center, Dalapit was fired from her San Francisco airport security job because a controversial federal law required all screeners to be U.S. citizens. At the time, she was a legal permanent resident.

With her favorite job gone, Dalapit scrambled back to school and obtained a certified nurse aide certificate.

"When I was laid off at the airport, I was very, very upset," said Dalapit, 53. "After that, I thought to myself I wanted to find a job I can work without worrying about ever getting laid off again."

Dalapit thought she found that job security at In-Home Supportive Services Public Authority in San Francisco (IHSS), a joint county- and state-funded program that pays home caregivers to help feed, bathe, cook and run errands for low-income elderly and the disabled. She ekes out \$24,000 a year.

This week, Dalapit might have to start scrambling again. On April 1, state officials will decide if they plan to slash her meager salary by 15 percent, down to \$20,300.

Brought on by the deficit-riddled state budget, the salary reduction will force this Philippines native and others like her to search for a new line of work. Given the state of the economy, her prospects are not great, she said.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," said the San Francisco resident. "My husband was laid off in January, and we can't afford to live on just this."

On Wednesday, Mike Genest, California's budget director, and Bill Lockyer, the treasurer, are scheduled to announce whether the state can use \$10 billion of federal stimulus money to offset a shortfall in the state's general fund. California is expected to receive \$31.5 billion for education and other specific programs. Officials, however, have estimated that only \$8.2 billion of that money can be used to offset shortages in the state's general fund, to the dismay of advocates for the poor. Fiscal watchdog groups maintain the state's calculation is a conservative one.

"They have a lot of latitude to count a wide array of federal funds," said Jean Ross, executive director of the nonpartisan California Budget Project. "We think there may be potentially more money."

If a threshold of \$10 billion cannot be met, the state will cut health, welfare programs and increase income tax, among other things.

Spokesmen for Genest, a Republican, and Lockyer, a Democrat, said they are carefully reviewing their options. The pair hosted an emotionally charged public hearing that drew dozens of elders and disabled people to Sacramento on March 17.

"We are doing a number of things to be as transparent as possible," said H.D. Palmer, Genest's spokesman.

Specifically, IHSS workers face about \$78 million in cuts, leaving nearly half a million clients around the state in limbo. Many workers who care for the seniors also are their relatives, which has been successful in keeping families together and the infirmed in their homes, explained Donna Calame, executive director of IHSS, which provides services to more than 19,000 people in San Francisco.

“There is going to be a lot of worker turnover,” Calame said.

Currently, the state shares the costs of paying the wages and benefits of IHSS workers with each county. If the cuts were to take place, California would cap its contribution to the state’s minimum wage, leaving counties, such as San Francisco, that provide workers with living wages – instead of the minimum wage – to come up with the rest. But considering the current economic crisis, it’s unlikely San Francisco will step in to offset the wage losses, officials say.

Like Dalapit, Emma Largaespada, 58, who cares for 88-year-old artist Eduardo “Papa” Michaelson, also is facing a pay cut. For an hourly wage of \$11.54, she travels daily to Michaelson’s tiny apartment, which is packed with books on movies and art. Her salary pretty much goes to covering her rent of \$2,000 a month, she said.

“I love my job and I love Papa,” Largaespada said. “But if they reduce my salary to the minimum wage, I’m going to be homeless.”

Home care of seniors, is a rapidly growing industry in the state of California, one that has been transformed by the unionization of the workers and the increase of wages and benefits. As a result, the quality of the workforce has improved, said Candace Howes, professor of economics at Connecticut College in New London, Ct., who for several years studied the positive transformation of this industry in California with a grant funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies.

“When the wages go down, you have a deterioration of service on the IHSS clients, and that will put a burden on nursing homes,” Howes said. “And as the workers’ incomes go down, they will likely quit their jobs and rely on Medicaid. How would that stimulate the economy?”

The demography of home care workers is as diverse as its clients. In San Francisco, for example, 32 percent are Asian and African American, 29 percent Latino and 25 percent white, according to the IHSS Consortium.

Largaespada, who hails from Nicaragua, illustrates why she was drawn to IHSS. Not fluent in English, Largaespada has cared for Michaelson, a Cuba native who prefers to speak Spanish, for six years. When she first moved to this country, she tried babysitting, but she said she found helping seniors to be much more fulfilling work.

Over the years, the two said they have formed a tight bond that is based on care and trust.

“It is criminal what they’re trying to do with the salary of the workers,” said Michaelson, who is suffering from congestive heart failure and gout. “What she’s earning is nothing compared to what she does right now. She’s my ears, eyes, my feet – she is everything to me.”

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