

Obscure Budget Proposal Threatens Senior Centers

By [DAVID W. CHEN](#)

Published: March 7, 2010

The Bloomberg administration is scrambling to come up with contingency plans to close as many as one-fifth of the city's 321 senior centers after being caught off guard by an obscure state budget proposal that would slash the centers' financing by nearly 30 percent.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Linda M. Leest, executive director of Services Now for Adult Persons, said the possible closures could not come at a worse time.

Describing what the loss of state money would mean for the centers, Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, the city's commissioner at the [Department for the Aging](#), was blunt. "Catastrophic," she said.

Only in the last couple of weeks have city officials and advocates for the elderly become fully aware of Gov. [David A. Paterson](#)'s decision because it was not the typical budget reduction that becomes part of the annual jousting between Albany and New York City.

Instead, the proposal would alter an arcane formula and redirect \$25 million in federal money that has traditionally been set aside for senior centers toward state programs to combat domestic violence and elder abuse.

State officials say the proposal, which would result in a small savings, is part of a packet of painful moves that are necessary as they struggle to close an \$8.2 billion deficit for the next fiscal year, which starts April 1.

"The executive budget has reductions and eliminations in funding in every single area of the budget," said Jessica Bassett, a spokeswoman for the state's [Division of Budget](#). "It's a budget of necessity and not of choice, and there are many difficult decisions like this one."

But city officials and advocates for the elderly criticized what they characterized as a budgetary sleight-of-hand that could lead to the shuttering of 40 to 75 senior centers.

That would be devastating, they say, for older New Yorkers who have long depended on the centers for meals, friendship and other services. Every day, about 29,000 older New Yorkers visit senior centers.

The city recently released an analysis of poverty rates among different groups that found that older New Yorkers are the city's poorest population; Ms. Barrios-Paoli said that about 90 percent of those who frequent senior centers are poor.

"This is a very painful cut masquerading as an accounting gimmick," said Micah Lasher, the Bloomberg administration's director of legislative affairs in Albany. "In a year of difficult choices, this is an unusually painful and disproportionate cut to a very vulnerable population."

But in a sign of just how seriously the city is treating the threat, Ms. Barrios-Paoli has ordered her staff to identify senior centers that could be closed because, among other factors, they are not as busy as other centers or they duplicate services offered by centers nearby. It is the first time, she said, that the city has been forced to conduct such an analysis in anticipation of major cuts.

The city had routinely been receiving \$25 million as part of the state's share of what is called **Title XX federal financing** and had assumed that the money would be forthcoming this year, even in a difficult financial climate.

"This just changes the entire rules of the game," Ms. Barrios-Paoli said. "We're making judgments about ending programs, which we had never done before."

Though city officials said they understood the magnitude of the state's budget woes, they said they were angered not just by the impact of the proposal, but also by the way it was delivered, in a less than obvious budget maneuver.

"It was a sneaky cut," said Jessica Lappin, a [City Council](#) member and the chairwoman of the aging committee, who described the proposal as an "evisceration of services to seniors."

The proposal must be approved by the Legislature, and [Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz](#), a Bronx Democrat and the chairman of the Assembly's committee on aging, declared the issue "my No. 1 priority." He persuaded 10 other legislators to sign a letter to Assembly Speaker

[Sheldon Silver](#) warning of a “potentially dangerous” proposal that would put “50 to 100 centers in serious jeopardy of closing.”

The City Council speaker, [Christine C. Quinn](#), is also leading an effort to have the proposal overturned. The Council’s committee on aging is scheduled to hold a hearing on the issue Tuesday, which will follow a planned rally on the steps of City Hall to oppose the initiative.

Advocates for the elderly were already bracing for a grim budget season. Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) warned in his January budget presentation that the city might need to shut down 15 senior centers if the state did not provide more local aid.

Linda M. Leest, executive director of [Services Now for Adult Persons](#), which runs three senior centers in eastern Queens, said the notion of shutting senior centers could not come at a worse time.

Ms. Leest said that, in the last year, she had seen an increase in the number of times seniors were eating meals at her centers: four or five times a week, versus once a week.

“I couldn’t breathe when I heard about this,” she said.