

3/31/11: Oregonian guest editorial - Stepping up again

Stepping up again to protect our most vulnerable

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By Mary Jaeger and Jerry Cohen

The Oregonian's March 26 front page headline had it right: Oregon's safety net for our most vulnerable elders and persons with disabilities is riddled with holes. But by focusing exclusively on the horrific cases of some elders sexually abused in some facilities, the stories missed the impact that significant cuts in Oregon's long-term care system will have on an already stressed system.

For the fourth time in more than a decade, the threat of substantial cuts looms over our unique long-term care system -- a system that serves as a critical resource for the majority of Oregonians needing basic care at home or in home-like settings. Just a decade ago, Oregon was an innovative leader in both home-based care and in aggressively educating and assisting state and local law enforcement in the prevention, early intervention, investigation and prosecution of physical and emotional abuse, neglect and financial exploitation. An Attorney General's Task Force on Elder & Disability Abuse existed and worked together with Senior & Disabled Services, aggressively conducting outreach and training for prosecutors and with community organizations like AARP, local Area Agencies on Aging and the Oregon Bankers Association. Oregon had a strong team of innovative leaders within several state agencies who made aging and disabilities a priority.

Between 2002 and 2004, cuts to community supports like these were implemented and were never totally restored, even as we see an increase in Oregonians who have or will need care or who provide care for loved ones. Indeed, AARP reports that in 2009 more than 620,000 Oregonians provided unpaid care to family or friends at a value of more than \$4.8 billion.

The current budget proposed by the governor would dramatically reduce vital resources that programs serving Oregon's seniors and people with disabilities depend upon, including meals and respite to the families and friends who provide care. Ironically, the end result will be thousands of Oregonians facing much more expensive skilled nursing care as their only option, adding further stress to these facilities and threatening quality of care. The proposed budget would also end up cutting jobs of paid community-based caregivers while leaving millions of dollars in federal funding on the table.

One of the more cost-effective ways to help prevent and combat abusive situations in various care facilities is through increased investment in home- and community-based care and promoting greater family and community involvement. As pointed out in a December story in The Oregonian, the Oregon Long Term Care Ombudsman program is one that should be expanded. Instead, the program faces an uncertain future as volunteer engagement is often the first to be cut.

The challenge for our state and community leaders, the governor, attorney general, state Legislature and media is to apply leadership. As a recent AARP Oregon survey validates: We all want to remain living at home with choice, dignity and independence for as long as possible. Thirty years ago Oregon set the national standard for how we care for our most vulnerable. We need to step up again.

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Link to article referred to in paragraph 1:

http://www.oregonlive.com/news/index.ssf/2011/03/oregons_safety_net_for_vulnera.html