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Proposed Medicaid cuts could threaten Tomball area nursing homes

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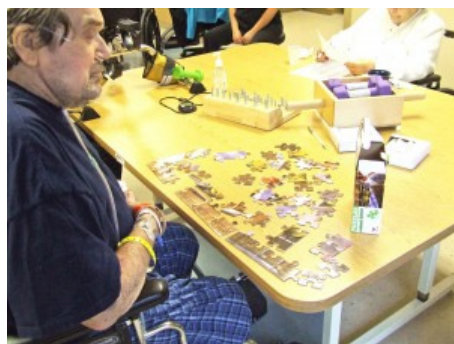
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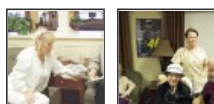
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JENNIFER BELL

A patient at Park Manor solves a jigsaw puzzle



Posted: Monday, February 7, 2011 12:00 am | Updated: 9:35 am, Tue Feb 8, 2011.

By Jennifer Bell | 0 comments

With the threat of Medicaid cuts looming in the state budget, local nursing homes are concerned that changes in funding could cause them to close their doors.

At the Greater Tomball Area Chamber of Commerce's Government and Legislative Affairs Committee meeting Feb. 1, Tamika Simmons, community relations director at Park Manor nursing home, said that current budgets proposed by the Texas House of Representatives and Senate include a 10 percent reduction in Medicaid funding to doctors, nursing homes and hospitals.

Statewide this means a total budget cut of \$1.4 billion for nursing homes, or 33 percent less than current funding. This percentage includes a shortfall where Medicaid was previously bolstered by stimulus funding.

It's a number that could mean less staff and less care, and a number that scares Nancy Wood, Park Manor's administrator.

"We're asked to reduce expenses and still provide services," said Wood. "There's a travesty being presented--we have to manage our state budget, but let's not do it on the backs of the elderly."

According to the Texas Healthcare Association, the average nursing facility serves 83 residents and 69 percent of these residents pay with Medicaid. As well, the average facility employs 114 staff members.

If Medicaid is cut, area administrators believe local jobs and economies will also be at risk.

"Every piece of the budget that's cut, somebody loses their job," said Gary DeJean, administrator at Tomball Nursing Center. "There are four major nursing homes here, and this would definitely hurt Tomball."

Medicaid is a state-administered program that was designed to help low-income individuals and families cover medical expenses, but the elderly, disabled and pregnant women may also be eligible, with income considered.

Individuals and families must apply for assistance, and if they qualify, payments go directly to healthcare providers.

In Texas last year, over 3 billion people were enrolled in Medicaid. At \$8.3 billion a year, Medicaid is one of the biggest expenditures in the state, second only to education.

But in the minds of nursing home owners, the care of elderly is worth the money.

"The elderly have paid their dues, they deserve good care in their later years," said DeJean. A "2 to 3 percent cut, perhaps we would be able to absorb, but with a 33 percent cut, we wouldn't survive."

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If Tomball facilities are forced to close, a bigger problem may present itself: displaced elderly patients who cannot care for themselves.

"I would say to legislators: look elsewhere, these individuals have no other mechanisms to survive, they don't have a choice to get a job," said Wood.

Nursing home administrators, along with health care lobby groups like Texas Healthcare Association, are pushing for state representatives to fight this legislation.

Park Manor is organizing a town hall meeting in Tomball to garner support from the public as well.

Tomball has "so many healthcare facilities, and they're a great economic source for the community," said Wood. "We buy in Tomball, and if that's taken away, we've taken away our economic strength."



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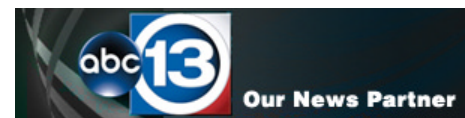
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