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Fed cuts putting senior care on chopping block

Budget cuts resulting from the federally mandated sequester have placed in jeopardy some services to one of the county's most vulnerable populations — the elderly.

The cuts, part of the Budget Control Act (BCA), were passed by Congress in August 2011. Totaling around \$1.2 trillion, they began last fiscal year, which ended on June 30, and are scheduled to continue every year through 2021.

“Through the federal sequester, Congress has dealt a serious blow to Surry County's frail, vulnerable older adults with chronic illnesses who rely on a home-delivered meal, a ride to a medical appointment or an in-home aide to help with simple activities they can no longer perform, such as housekeeping or bathing,” said Adrienne Calhoun, assistant director of the Area Agency on Aging (AAA).

The agency administers the county's allocation of funds through the Home and Community Care Block Grant (HCCBG), which provides the elderly with critical services that allow them to stay in their homes, said Bob Cleveland, aging program planner for the agency.

“We're feeling the pinch,” he said. “For example, going back to the last fiscal year, we had to make cuts due to the sequester in the last quarter of the year, and at the same time, we also had to make cuts for the first three months of this fiscal year.”

Last year, the agency had to cut \$7,387 in services, which included the loss of 1,522 provided meals for seniors and cuts to in-home aid and transportation services.

“Between July and September, we must cut another \$6,954 in the nutrition program, resulting in 2,283 meals lost, and another \$4,793 in funding for in-home aide services and transportation,” Calhoun said.

“In addition, we just received word Monday of additional cuts due to cuts in the federal budget, that are projected to be around \$16,222,” Cleveland said. “It could even be worse, depending on the budget passed by Congress, but at this point, any cut is horrible. We're already dealing with losses in meals, transportation and in-home aide services. This additional cut will have to come from transportation and in-home aide services as well.”

Trying to mitigate the anticipated loss of services, Cleveland said officials are trying to apply for grants and are even approaching churches for assistance.

“We’re doing whatever we can to try to run as tight as we can, but the waiting list for services is still growing,” he said, noting that around 16,000 seniors across the state are waiting for assistance from the AAA. Figures for Surry County were not available.

“The sequester is supposed to continue cutting our funding every year through 2021, so we’re looking at cuts to services for the elderly for the next eight years,” he said. “Right now, we’re encouraging people to contact their legislators to let them know the impact of this. This is a huge inequity.”

And the problem is expected to grow for the foreseeable future, Calhoun said.

“While these dollar amounts and numbers of meals may appear small to some, decreases in services could not have come at a worse time, as growth in the older population segment swings into high gear with the aging of the baby boomers,” she said. “In Surry County, from 2010 to 2030, the 60-plus age group is projected to increase 22 percent, from about 17,000 to more than 20,700 individuals, comprising 28 percent of the total population.”

In light of such growth, cutting funding for programs that keep the elderly in their homes doesn’t make any financial sense, according to Cleveland and Calhoun.

“Surry County was allocated \$12.2 million in Medicaid funds for 475 recipients of nursing home care during fiscal year 2011-2012,” Calhoun said. “However, only 2.3 percent of the amount spent on Medicaid nursing home expenditures, \$316,349, was allocated for 431 elderly who received meals. Which shows greater stewardship of the funds, \$25,779 per nursing home resident, or \$734 per year to feed one of our elderly who is aging at home, where they prefer to be?”

“It doesn’t make any sense to us,” Cleveland added. “They’re our most vulnerable population. We don’t think it makes sense to put all this money toward nursing homes, when it’s far cheaper to keep people at home where they want to be in the first place.”

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