

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Seniors — maybe you, too — need Medicaid-paid care

By Grace Li
July 15, 2017



Medicare recipients take a painting class taught by Esperanza Villanueva (left) in December at On Lok's 30th Street Senior Center in San Francisco.

The changes Congress is proposing to the Affordable Care Act would have devastating impacts on seniors and other vulnerable Americans if enacted. On Lok is strongly opposed to restructuring the Medicaid program as proposed in these bills. Indeed, the changes under consideration in Congress would affect us all.

Both the House and Senate repeal-and-replace proposals would end the Medicaid program as an entitlement and cap federal funding, along with making other dramatic changes to our health care system. Medicaid is a critical safety net program and the largest federal health program caring for low-income, vulnerable individuals — nearly two-thirds of all Medicaid spending is focused on seniors and adults with disabilities.

Shifting Medicaid to a capped program would disproportionately harm frail seniors and persons with disabilities, and would force states to either end these vital programs, scale back benefits, raise eligibility requirements or cut provider rates.

These proposed changes come as demand for long-term care services and supports is growing with the aging of the Baby Boomers. Medicaid is the primary funder of nursing home care and covers 62 percent of nursing home residents. Today, 6 million seniors nationwide receive Medicaid and 1.4 million seniors reside in nursing homes.

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Olinda Marti-Volkoff, a Medicare recipient, (center) works on a painting while taking a class with other seniors at the On Lok 30th Street Senior Center in San Francisco, Calif., on Friday, Dec. 2, 2016. She visits the center almost every weekday for classes and to volunteer. House Speaker Paul Ryan has called for changing Medicare from the current plan, where the government pays the bills, to a defined payment plan, where seniors get a certain amount of money to buy private insurance. Studies have shown that likely means higher costs and less coverage for seniors.

As a family of nonprofit organizations that has served vulnerable seniors for more than 45 years, On Lok cares for nearly 1,450 frail seniors in the Bay Area. Ninety-nine percent of seniors in On Lok's Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) are covered through Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program. Because the PACE model provides a coordinated system of preventive care with regular access to physicians and other health care professionals, including supportive services, PACE participants receive high-value necessary care.

It is imperative that the Medicaid program remain strong for our nation's most vulnerable. So please — speak up now. Educate yourself on the proposed changes, contact your congressional representatives and encourage your friends and family across the country to do the same. Together, we can make a difference.

Grace Li is the CEO of On Lok, a San Francisco nonprofit organization that pioneered the PACE model of coordinated care.

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