

# Eliminating the MSSP and CBAS puts lives at risk

By Romilla Batra

Representing a nonprofit Medicare Advantage plan that has served California's older adults for 43 years, I've applauded much of what Gov. Gavin Newsom has done to support seniors during the COVID-19 crisis, including his "Stay Home. Save Lives. Check In." campaign. This spirit of support quickly came to a halt, however, when his latest budget proposal was announced last week.

To cover major deficits from the state's closed economy, Newsom has proposed deep cuts to services that support older adults, including the elimination of the Multipurpose Senior Services Program (MSSP) and Community-Based Adult Services (CBAS) as early as July. California's budget gap caused by the pandemic will no doubt force our legislators to make many tough decisions, but eliminating these programs is not the answer.

In many ways, MSSP and CBAS are the last line of defense before nursing home placement for 46,000 seniors and people with disabilities. This is something we cannot put in jeopardy during the pandemic. Nursing home residents account for one-third of COVID-19 deaths statewide and half of deaths in Los Angeles County, with similarly grim statistics coming out of Orange County, San Diego and Inland Empire nursing facilities. Nationwide, outbreaks in nursing homes and long-term care facilities have killed more than 33,800 people, more than a third of all U.S. coronavirus deaths. By comparison, MSSP sites statewide report just 15 positive COVID-19 cases and three deaths to date. It's clear older adults are safest living in their homes. This not the time to cut back on this vital support.

For 43 years, MSSP has served as a lifeline to the oldest, poorest, and frailest Californians and their family caregivers. The majority of the state's 12,000 MSSP clients reside alone, live on about \$1,000 per month and have complex medical and psychosocial needs requiring specialized medical and social support services. The program supports these needs by offering services



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Care needs are the last thing that should be cut as the state budget is trimmed because of economic hits from the coronavirus pandemic.

like transportation to appointments, access to community resources for food, safety equipment and medical supplies and care coordination with medical providers. Without this, individuals and their families must navigate a complicated array of medical and social services alone or face institutionalization.

One of my organization's MSSP clients is a frail, 90-year-old woman who lives with her 64-year-old daughter and grandson. Diagnosed with congestive heart failure, high blood pressure and end-stage Alzheimer's disease, she has a history of strokes and is blind, requiring total care. Her adult daughter, who works nights at a local hospital, is her sole caregiver. She is responsible for paying for her mother's feeding tube and supplies, and transportation to a myriad of medical appointments, all while trying to balance her own life needs and dealing with caregiver burnout. Through MSSP, the family was referred to an in-home physician and care planner who coordinated numerous vital resources. The client's condition has markedly improved and the high cost of care is no longer a family burden. Her daughter is now confident she will be able to retire when she's 65.

Beyond impacted families, MSSP's in-home services create significant savings for the state. Total cost for MSSP patients is

45 percent less than nursing facility placement, where the cost of care averages \$110,000 annually in California.

Offering similar advantages as MSSP, CBAS is an essential Medi-Cal day health program that protects older adults with chronic medical, cognitive, mental health conditions, and those with disabilities who are at risk of needing long-term institutional care. If CBAS is eliminated, there are no comparable services in the state to replace it.

Knowing MSSP and CBAS have faced elimination before and won, I am inspired to act. On behalf of the older adults of California, I urge legislators to protect our seniors and the vital work of community-based social services in helping seniors remain at home. As a chief medical officer, I can confidently say eliminating the MSSP and the CBAS programs puts frail Californians at even greater risk for poor health outcomes and nursing home placement. Both programs are proven, cost-effective models of care that maintain the health of fragile, older adults and provide savings to the state. MSSP and CBAS save lives.

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