

County's aging alliance identifies gaps in services

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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WOODLAND — Food insecurity, transportation issues, insufficient mental health care and elder abuse are among the most significant issues facing Yolo County's senior citizens, according to a report presented to county supervisors on Tuesday.

The report, commissioned by the Yolo Healthy Aging Alliance, found that gaps in services for seniors have opened as the county's population of residents over age 65 continues to grow and is expected to increase from 10 percent of the Yolo population in 2010 to 22 percent by 2050. Funding cuts, particularly at the federal level, were cited as the primary reason for service gaps.

In assessing the needs of seniors in the county, the alliance worked with a graduate student in the public health department at UC Davis. In her report, Claire Legendre-Sholl said cutbacks in the federal Older Americans Act nutrition programs have hit the Elderly Nutrition Program of Yolo County particularly hard.

Better known as Meals on Wheels, the program served 82,027 meals to Yolo County residents in 2011-12, Legendre-Sholl said.

In addition to meals, the program often provides the only human contact some homebound seniors have during the course of a day. As such, Meals on Wheels workers serve as a sort of welfare check on their clients, ensuring their safety and security and referring them to other services.

In 2011-12, the program provided 1,154 comprehensive evaluations to assess client needs and link them to other services; screened 466 seniors for nutritional risk and provided 590 disaster preparedness packets and personal alert devices.

But federal funding cuts have jeopardized Meals on Wheels services. According to Supervisor Jim Provenza, who chairs the Healthy Aging Alliance, the program may have to cease home delivery of meals to rural areas of the county and for the first time ever, begin placing new clients on a waiting list for food.

Additionally, the number of days per week for home-delivered meals will be decreased.

Seniors living in rural areas are already facing service gaps related to a lack of transportation, the report found.

When transportation is available, it is primarily geared toward medical visits, the report found, with fewer options available for grocery shopping, social activities and other needs.

Another gap, the report found, is in the area of mental health services.

In years past, the county had case management services — including home visits and assessments — through the Prevention and Early Intervention Program, but the program was the victim of budget cuts, the report found.

There is also a need for more public health nurses, the report said, with public health nurse positions having been reduced from five or six to just 1.5, according to the Mental Health Services Act coordinator.

Additionally, the county can collect reimbursement only for clients who are on Medi-Cal, the report said, leaving those on Medicare unable to access mental health services offered by the county, with little help elsewhere.

“There is a very limited number of geriatric psychiatrists available in Yolo County who accept Medicare,” the report said, citing low Medicare reimbursement to mental health practitioners as a likely reason why.

In addition to funding cuts, prison realignment also has impacted seniors in unforeseen ways, the report found.

“Some parolees, who are released early from jail due to overcrowding in California prisons and jails, are moving back in with their parents,” the report said. “Some of these situations turn into various types of abuse in which the adult child financially or emotionally abuses their parent(s).”

“Since this is a new finding,” the report said, “and is usually underreported, there are no current data or statistics to report.”

The alliance, which is a privately funded nonprofit, will focus on ways to bridge gaps and improve the welfare of seniors.

Executive director Sheila Allen told supervisors on Tuesday that a joint meeting with the county mental health board in early December, for example, will focus on improving mental health services for seniors.

The alliance is also lobbying Congress to restore funding to the Older Americans Act.

Allen and Provenza both said the three-year-old alliance has already made a difference in the lives of seniors in Yolo County, in particular through the education and referral efforts.

“People are now being served ... who otherwise would not be served were it not for this effort,” Provenza said. “I can’t emphasize enough the importance of collaboration and coordination. Individual agencies don’t always know what other agencies are providing... and you can do a lot with existing funding and existing services.”

Learn more about the alliance at www.yolohealthyaging.org

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