

## **Higher cost of living at home By Steve Peoples**

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The state's new arrangement with Medicaid might mean higher copayments for the elderly who use adult daycare.

PROVIDENCE -- Irene Wiggin wants to stay in her home. And Governor Carcieri says he wants to grant her wish.

The alternative -- a nursing home -- would probably be far less comfortable for the 86-year-old Warwick woman than her home of the last 50 years, and far more expensive for the state.

But Wiggin's family says that the governor is pushing her into institutional care, despite his high-profile plans to help seniors and disabled Rhode Islanders stay at home. The "rebalancing of the state's long-term care system" away from nursing homes is among the top priorities in Carcieri's recently sealed agreement with federal Medicaid officials.

But in what is among the first moves to fall under the new arrangement, the Carcieri administration has proposed higher copayments for hundreds of seniors such as Wiggin who use adult daycare. That means it may cost Wiggin, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease eight years ago, an additional \$150 each month.

"With little increase in her monthly Social Security check, it is unlikely that she would be able to afford this increase," Wiggin's daughter, Charlene Williams, said in a letter submitted yesterday to state lawmakers. The family would have little option but to put their mother in a nursing home, which is covered by Medicaid funds.

"Please allow our parents to maintain the services they currently receive and the quality of life they deserve," Williams wrote.

The Carcieri administration has already submitted plans to federal Medicaid officials to boost co-payments on adult daycare for most people from \$11.50 per day to \$18, beginning April 1. The proposal -- initially included in the governor's mid-year budget-repair bill -- would apply to more than 350 seniors in adult daycare, saving the state approximately \$55,000 in the coming months, according to Corinne Calise Russo, the director of the Department of Elderly Affairs.

"We're trying to maintain our budget at the department. That was our consideration," Russo told the House Finance Committee yesterday, when asked to defend the proposal.

Committee member Eileen S. Naughton, D-Warwick, noted that Rhode Island had just entered an unprecedented Medicaid agreement with the federal government that was supposed to help seniors stay in their homes. Adult daycare and other community-based programs were supposed to be made more available.

"Will they have more to fear or less to fear [under the new system]?" Naughton asked.

"I'm not sure," Russo responded. "It's a matter of looking at what the budget allows."

Carcieri's Medicaid agreement actually funnels new money into the state for services that previously didn't qualify for matching federal funds. That includes \$1 million for home care and adult daycare services, according to Russo.

But that money isn't being used to eliminate the co-pays. Russo said the department may lower the new daycare rate to \$15 per day, but there were no plans to back off the proposal altogether.

That was troubling for William Flynn, executive director of the Senior Agenda Coalition, who noted the influx of federal funds from the new Medicaid agreement.

"While we recognize the state's difficult fiscal situation, it does not seem justified to put the financial burden ... on some of our most vulnerable citizens," he told the Finance Committee. "These participants are frail elders who are struggling to stay at home and trying to live on about \$20,000 to \$24,000 a year."

And the seniors aren't the only people who will suffer, according to John E. O'Hara, who serves on the state legislative committee for AARP of Rhode Island.

"It affects entire families who are struggling to support their loved ones as best they can," he said. "If families can't afford to use adult daycare, then more of them will be forced to put their loved ones in nursing homes, at greater expense to the state."

That's exactly what may happen to Irene Wiggin. Currently, she spends most days at Cornerstone Adult Services, an adult daycare center in Warwick, where she's regularly encouraged to sing. "Although she no longer knows the words, she's always in perfect pitch," Williams wrote. "Cornerstone has provided my mother with a safe, secure and stimulating environment in which to pass her time ... The loss of enabling our family to take care of our mother in the way we feel is best for her would be devastating."

Steven Brown, left, executive director of the Rhode Island Affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union, waits to testify before the House Judiciary Committee yesterday. Story, B3 The Providence Journal / Connie Grosch  
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