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Ukiah Senior Center ending program offering food, health care and companionship

By JUSTINE FREDERIKSEN/The Daily Journal

Updated: 04/18/2011 08:06:53 PM PDT

Late Friday morning, Debbie Davis was plating food for about two dozen patiently waiting seniors.

"This one is for Jack," Davis said, holding out a plate after carefully cutting up the chicken into bite-size pieces and making sure there wasn't anything he couldn't eat.

"I know them all by heart," Davis said, explaining that she plates the food according to each person's dietary restrictions, needs and even taste preferences.

Davis is the activities director for the Ukiah Senior Center's Adult Day Health Care program, which serves breakfast and lunch to about 20 people, mostly seniors, each day in a building tucked behind the center. Along with the meals, the participants are engaged in activities, taken to doctors' appointments and evaluated to make sure their health needs are being met.

Lavonna Silveria, executive director of the Ukiah Senior Center, said the program is paid for through Medi-Cal, and recipients qualify for the benefit when they have chronic conditions like dementia, or need more help regaining strength and independence after events such as hip surgery.

To address the variety of needs participants have, Silveria said the program has a registered nurse, occupational therapist, social worker, dietitian and other professionals on hand. However, what seems to make the most difference to the participants is the social interaction they receive.

"Them coming together, socializing -- that's the best medicine for them," said Program Director Donna

Squires.

June Bostwick, 80, said the program was a

"godsend" to her, though she admitted to being skeptical about it when she first came.

"Now, I find total peace here," Bostwick said, explaining that she gets companionship and support from the other seniors who attend.

Rose English, 85, said she enjoys coming to the program because it "gets me out of the house," and it gives her much more to do than "sit at home and twiddle my thumbs."

"If they aren't coming here, they are sitting in front of the TV," said Silveria, adding that in about 10 weeks, that very well could happen. Come July, Silveria said the center will no longer be able to offer the program.

"We're not closing it because we want to," she said, explaining that the reason was two-fold: the state of California is reducing funding to Medi-Cal, and the number of participants in the program is dwindling.

"We are licensed to have 35 people, and we need 24 to break-even -- but we've been averaging about 20," Silveria said, attributing the low numbers in large part to the fact that the criteria for qualifying for the program keeps getting stricter, meaning less and less people can take advantage. "And those that do qualify are very frail, and less likely to attend."

Combine the reduction in participants with a 50 percent cut in Medi-Cal funding, and Silveria said the center cannot afford to keep the program running.

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We accept all miracles'

Squires said monetary donations could keep the program running and that "we accept all miracles," adding that she and the other dozen employees are not looking forward to the panic that will erupt when they close.

"People will be calling us crying, asking how they're going to get to their doctors' appointments, how they're going to get their lunch," said Squires, and Silveria predicted that participants will end up in the hospital sooner, and in nursing homes sooner once the program ends.

"Our mission is to keep seniors living independently as long as possible," she said, adding that the assistance is also vital to family members taking care of loved ones with dementia and Alzheimer's, offering them a rare respite from providing constant supervision and care.

Along with the impact it will have on the participants and their families, Silveria said the program's closure will cost about a dozen people their jobs and Mendocino County about \$500,000 a year.

"(However), we want people to know that the senior center will not be affected," she said. "Except for our transportation program. We will not be offering transportation on Wednesdays."

Contact Silveria at the center at 462-4343.

Justine Frederiksen can be reached at udjff@pacific.net, or 468-3521.



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