

Medicaid enrollees struggle without some services

Program cuts » Still more on the horizon

By Lisa Rosetta

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In a wheelchair and barely able to use her arms, Sonja Evans started physical therapy three years ago, hoping to build back her strength.

Diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when she was 15, the 38-year-old Helper woman started going to physical therapy twice a week. Evans, who at one time could only lift 2 pounds, can now pump 20. And she is walking on parallel bars.

"I'm not perfect, but I can do so much more," she said. "I can wash a little bit of dishes and that's wonderful, you know. It's just amazing what PT can do to your body, because it will come back."

Evans' therapy, however, abruptly ended Nov. 1 when some services considered optional by Medicaid were slashed as part of a 1.5 percent budget cut made during the Legislature's September special session. Not only did physical therapy get dropped, but so did occupational therapy, speech and hearing services, vision care and chiropractic treatment.

The Utah Department of Health estimates that up to 57,000 enrollees could be affected by the cuts in services, though it notes that in fiscal year 2008 only about 19,000 eligible for the services used them.

Now people like Evans are struggling to do without. By herself at home during the day -- her husband works -- she tries to maintain the progress she has made by lifting weights and doing exercises.

"I hope that we can continue (physical) therapy so that all of us have the ability to live a normal life -- or as much as we can," she said. "It's so vital to people's health."

And to the state's pocketbook: for every \$1 Utah spends on Medicaid, the federal government contributes \$3 more. The Utah Health Policy Project (UHPP) estimates the Legislature's \$9 million trim of optional services will translate to a loss of \$22.7 million in federal Medicaid funding for fiscal year 2010. It is an amount, UHPP says, that supports 927 Utah jobs that generate about \$47.4 million in economic activity.

The human costs, however, are more difficult to quantify.

"The cuts are harmful," said Sheila Walsh-McDonald, an advocate for the Salt Lake Community Action Program. "They really limit services to people and for the individuals we're talking about [who live at or below 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Level]. They do not have options to pay for those needed services."

One southern Utah physical therapist -- who asked that his name not be used to protect the identity of his patients -- said he now sees between five and 10 fewer Medicaid patients each month because, without the state health insurance, they can't afford the treatments on their own.

One patient, a 28-year-old man with spina bifida, is paralyzed from the waist down and regularly puts his feet in warm water to prevent his skin from cracking. Because of his lack of sensation, he accidentally kept them in scolding water for more than 30 minutes, getting third-degree burns. Wound care physical therapy treatment during the summer months helped the patient heal, preventing an infection and helping him avoid skin graft surgery. Without his Medicaid benefits, he would have likely been hospitalized for skin graft surgery and follow up care -- a much more costly scenario.

"This really isn't such a good idea," said the physical therapist, who has been in practice for 12 years. "In many cases you end up spending way more health care dollars with more severe repercussions."

Two other patients -- one with a dislocated shoulder and injured knee and the other with degenerative arthritis in both knees -- received orthopedic surgeries. Neither, however, was able to get the out-patient rehabilitation they need to fully recover because they were not able to start until after their benefits were dropped.

With the state slated to ax another 7 percent of its fiscal year 2010 budget, a growing number of Medicaid enrollees could feel the pain. Though money from the state's Rainy Day Fund could backfill about half of the health department's portion, certain populations -- including those who buy into Medicaid coverage because they make too much to qualify -- could see their benefits disappear altogether.

The department may also tighten its income threshold for pregnant women to receive prenatal care and for poor families to receive Medicaid, reduce the amount it pays pharmacies to fill Medicaid prescriptions, and scale back the dental benefits for children on the Children's Health Insurance Program.

"This is truly unprecedented for the state," said Lincoln Nehring, Medicaid director for UHHP. "We already have a very bare bones safety net program. And as I look at the cuts that are planned, we no longer have ... optional services or populations that we can target that can make it on their own."

Health department officials are hopeful that President-elect Barack Obama will sign a federal stimulus package that could increase the federal match rate for Medicaid, keeping both the 1.5 percent cut this year and the 3.5 percent cut next year at bay. Just a 1 percent bump in the match rate, for instance, could save Utah \$10 million. Alternatively, the federal government also could pick up the tab for services for new Medicaid enrollees.

"Hopefully we can delay any cuts until we fully understand what the (federal) stimulus package offers us and help policy makers to mitigate the harm," said Walsh-McDonald. "I really think for many of us, we are just anxiously awaiting the final language of the stimulus package."