

Nightmares Are Coming True In Calif. Health Coverage

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DATELINE: FROM SACRAMENTO

Jean called the other day from her desert condo near Palm Springs. She'd been notified that the state was cutting back again on aid for the disabled and she was worried.

Yep, I said, and the cut most likely will be even sharper than she was figuring.

Jean isn't her real name. She didn't want it used. "I still have friends in L.A. who don't know I live this way," she said. "I'd be embarrassed if they knew. Guess it's just pride. Nobody wants to admit they're down and out."

She suffers from fibromyalgia, a disease of the connective tissues. Several years ago, Jean says, she was a buyer for the old Bullock's department stores in L.A. but became afflicted with the painful ailment and finally couldn't work anymore.

She moved to the desert. It was cheaper living and she'd be closer to her aging mother. Jean is 63, her mother 86. "Turns out she helps me more than I help her."

On good days, Jean uses crutches. Other days, she's in a wheelchair. "The pain never goes away."

I hadn't talked to Jean in more than three years, since the first time she called expressing concern about the state ripping off federal cost-of-living boosts for the impoverished aged, blind and disabled. Yes, that's legal.

She's one of nearly 1.3 million Californians receiving federal Supplemental Security Income, augmented by a State Supplementary Program.

They've always been an easy target -- too poor to throw big bucks at political candidates.

But, of course, practically anyone who draws a state buck these days is vulnerable.

Faced with what he calculates to be a potential \$24-billion budget deficit in the fiscal year starting July 1, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed cutting state supplemental payments for the elderly and disabled down to the minimum allowed by federal law. It would be their third cut this year.

The Legislature already has approved a \$20 monthly cut beginning July 1, lowering the grant for single people to \$850. That's it: No food stamps, and that includes any Social Security.

This was the cut Jean had read about. But the governor also is seeking another \$20 trim starting in September, reducing the benefit to \$830.

The rent for her one-bedroom condo is \$850. But "I consider myself lucky," Jean says, because after a long wait, she finally received a federal rental subsidy administered by a local housing authority.

That's not the end of her financial woes, however. Jean has a broken tooth and badly needs a crown. But Medi-Cal, she says, will only pay for a type of crown that "dentists don't even use anymore." And things are about to get worse: On July 1, Medi-Cal will stop paying for adult dental care altogether.

Around the time Jean was calling, I got an e-mail from Marta Russell, an Encino-based freelance journalist who

has written widely about the disabled. Russell has had cerebral palsy from birth but made good money in the film industry, working on special effects, until she also contracted fibromyalgia and landed in a wheelchair. "I am in chronic pain," she says.

She's not poor enough to be on SSI but does need help at home "to empty trash, do laundry, pick up things that are heavy -- to stay out of an institution."

Schwarzenegger has proposed reducing caregiver pay under the In Home Support Services program -- used by 446,000 Californians with disabilities -- from a maximum of \$10.10 per hour (including benefits) to \$8.60. That will make it tougher to find help.

Worse for Russell, she wouldn't be deemed sufficiently impaired under the new rules to qualify for IHSS. "I can't imagine how I'm really going to deal with it," she says.

"I expect suicides, premature deaths, a horrible disruption of the social fabric. . . . We're headed toward market-based social Darwinism where only the fittest will survive."

The governor hopes to save \$402 million during the next fiscal year with his latest SSI-SSP cut. Reducing caregivers' wages would save \$124 million, and disqualifying the majority of current IHSS recipients would pocket \$385 million.

Of course, Schwarzenegger's proposed cutting goes much deeper than that. He also wants to completely eliminate the state's main welfare program, which benefits 1.3 million people, and save \$1.4 billion. And he's trying to scuttle the Healthy Families program that provides medical **insurance** for 930,000 children of low-income families, netting \$369 million.

"I know we all have to sacrifice something, but are the wealthy sacrificing anything?" Jean asked.

They'd say they're paying hefty taxes.

State budget director Mike Genest was asked another version of Jean's question by a reporter: "Why are all the poor people being cut?"

Genest: "The government doesn't provide services to rich people. We don't provide very many services even to the middle class. . . . You have to cut where the money is."

That's a little stretch. But Genest is mostly correct as it relates to the hemorrhaging general fund. Public schools serve students whose young parents are usually just starting up the economic ladder.

Of the current general fund, roughly 40% goes to K-12 schools and 32% to health and welfare. The next highest expenditures are higher education and prisons, each 11%. Everything's getting whacked, including employees.

Here are some predictions:

The aged, blind and disabled will take the Schwarzenegger hit. But the Legislature won't go along with completely wiping out welfare and children's healthcare. Republicans will refuse to raise taxes. Democrats will try to hike them on a majority vote. The projected deficit will be treated as \$20 billion, because the \$24 billion includes a \$4.5-billion reserve that Democrats won't allow the governor to hoard.

Opponents of last month's failed budget propositions accused Schwarzenegger of "scare tactics" when he tried to warn voters what would happen if the measures didn't pass. Well, Jean and Russell and many Californians are scared.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: CUTS: Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, left, and state budget director Mike Genest talk at the Capitol last month. PHOTOGRAPHER: Rich Pedroncelli Associated Press

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