

# Seniors and their advocates hold conference against governor's Community Reinvestment Plan

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**ALTON** - Many people representing seniors' issues from across the State of Illinois were in attendance for a conference at Senior Services Plus (SSP) with the aim of protecting the Community Care Program.

Currently, the Community Care Program is a necessary state-sponsored program assisting as many as 36,000 Illinois seniors continue to live at home. Without it, many worry they would have to be interred into nursing homes, which could ultimately cost taxpayers more than the \$800 a month average the current program costs. To replace it, Illinois Governor Rauner has proposed the Community Reinvestment Plan to a group of a dozen lawmakers. This program would gut as much as \$120 million currently utilized to assist seniors stay at home.

To give a personal face to the potential problems the Community Reinvestment Plan could cause seniors, several advocates of Illinois's aging population gathered at SSP to discuss how the change could affect them.

Home care worker Charrease Frazier said Rauner's plan could cause many seniors to die due to lack of in-home programs.

"They work hard for everything," she said. "They deserve something."

AARP Illinois Executive Council Theresa Collins said the \$120 million in savings Rauner promises is deceptive and short-sighted. She said the average cost of aiding seniors currently is \$830 a month, which she described as "dramatically cheaper" than putting those same seniors in nursing homes.

Those concerns were echoed by Illinois Alliance for Retired Americans leader Dorothy Asbury, who said she represented the interests of as many as 257,000 retirees across the State of Illinois.

Asbury said the new program would have as many as 36,000 seniors enter it. She said the program has not been tested and would cut benefits to seniors by as much as 31 percent.

"This is shameful," she said.

She also said the Illinois Department of Aging would have final say on cuts, and could exercise that power at any time.

"These benefits are not just nice to have, they are a necessity," she said.

Caregivers under Rauner's proposed plans would also not have to go through background checks as it stands now - a problem Asbury said is a daunting threat to senior safety across the state.

If these seniors are unable to adjust to the cuts and are forced into nursing homes, that cost to taxpayers could be as high as \$15,600 annually, Asbury said.

IMPACT CIL Executive Director Cathy Contarino spoke in regards to seniors who become disabled as they age. Decrease in vision, hearing and mobility are common as people age, she said. Contarino described disability as "a natural part of life," adding one in five people are disabled in some form.

"Seniors need more services, not less," she said.

Contarino spoke about the need for more services and community for seniors. She said many would not be able to survive if services were cut by Rauner's proposed 31 percent. She said the ones who could may face the prospect of entering nursing home care and foregoing all of the freedoms they currently enjoy.

"In a nursing home, your life is not your own," she said. "You can't sleep when you want, you can't bathe when you want, you can't eat when you want. You can't do any of the basic freedoms you have at home."

Lisa Brennan and Laura Kunz each have parents who utilize the adult daycare services of St. John's Community Care, which operates from Collinsville and Edwardsville.

Brennan, who cares for her 96-year-old mother said the daycare services allow her to be able to care for her mother in the home while still being able to work and go to school. She said her mother suffers from dementia, and the service allows her a higher quality of life, describing the services as both "cost-effective" and "life-enriching."

Kunz said her mother utilizes the services three days a week. She said cutting the program would have several effects on her mother, including decreased social activity. Kunz said her mother would not have the social benefits of interacting with other people during those days. Without the daycare services, Kunz said her mother, who suffers from dementia, would sit in front of the TV.

The executive director of that service, Nancy Berry described the current system as a "blessing to thousands of families," saying Rauner's program will be far more expensive in the long run. She said everyone acknowledges Illinois needs to save money, but added this proposed cut would not be the answer to that.

Service Employees International Union organizer George Hemberger presented the conference, and said the debate comes down to moral and economic. He said the governor's proposed plan was neither moral nor economic, considering all the seniors

who would have to suffer from it, and the economic burden their suffering would ultimately cause taxpayers.