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Gazette opinion: Lawmakers, unite to help Yellowstone County keep PACE

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Gazette opinion: Lawmakers, unite to help Yellowstone County keep PACE

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Speak up for PACE

Speak up

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Members of the Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services are: Rep. Don Roberts of Billings, chairman; Sen. Dave Lewis of Helena, vice chairman; Rep. Tony Belcourt, of Box Elder; Rep. Tom Burnett, of Bozeman; Sen. Mary Caferro of Helena; Rep. John Esp, of Big Timber; Sen. Jason Priest of Red Lodge; and Rep. Trudi Schmidt of Great Falls.

Research shows success

An extensive review of national PACE research published in the Nov. 3 Journal of the American Medical Association, shows that folks in these programs are hospitalized less, have fewer preventable hospital readmissions and have fewer preventable emergency room visits than people with similar health problems who aren't in the program. JAMA reported that a survey of PACE patients who had been in the program 2-6 years indicated that they had less pain and fewer unmet needs for assistance with activities of daily living. A five-year study concluded that PACE patients lived longer, too. PACE participants also were significantly more likely to get timely preventive care such as flu shots, vision and hearing screenings.

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Fifty-two frail, disabled or elderly Yellowstone County residents with multiple chronic illnesses are safe at home thanks to the little-known Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly.

All of these folks are at high risk for nursing home admission, but PACE, operated by Billings Clinic, brings a comprehensive team of caregivers to help each patient stay as healthy as possible at home.

PACE provides all of the services that its patients receive through Medicare and Medicaid, including prescription medication, rehab, therapy, doctor visits and hospital care. PACE provides transportation to all health care, in-home services as needed and a day center where patients can have a breakfast snack, lunch, health services, social interaction and fun activities, according to Judith Bowman, RN, PACE Center manager.

The PACE Center is located at Aspen Meadows, a West End nursing home and assisted living facility owned and operated by Billings Clinic.

Veterans benefit

Among the PACE patients, 27 are U.S. military veterans who have been referred by the Department of Veterans Affairs just since last summer, Bowman said. These military veterans have complex health problems. Through PACE, they receive all the health services they are entitled to through the VA, but they aren't required to travel to VA clinics or hospitals like most veterans. Instead, Billings Clinic contracts to provide all their care in Billings.

PACE is a small program in the state's senior health budget. But it makes a huge difference in the lives of the patients and families it serves. PACE allows patients to live as independently as

possible. It provides respite care so family caregivers can rejuvenate. The PACE Center serves patients while their family members work.

Funding at risk

On Tuesday, when the legislative joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services takes up the state senior and long-term care budget, PACE won't be in the executive spending proposal. The proposed \$314,000 of state funding needed to keep PACE for the next biennium has been cut.

Lawmakers should know that axing PACE will cost the state more than it saves. This is why:

The VA pays all the costs of the veteran patients, so their PACE participation costs the state nothing. However, VA requires that PACE programs have a state contract to work with VA patients. If there's no state appropriation, there can be no PACE for veterans either.

In the likely event that many of these 27 veterans would then require nursing home care without PACE, the state of Montana would pay for that through its Medicaid program.

For nonveteran patients, the cost of a month in PACE is about half of the cost of Medicaid-funded nursing home care. The federal government pays the majority of costs for both programs.

PACE has operated successfully in the United States for 25 years. However, the program was almost unknown in rural states until 2008 when Billings Clinic and a dozen other health care providers nationwide were selected for a rural pilot project.

Billings Clinic assumed considerable financial risk in starting PACE. The clinic, like other PACE providers, is paid a set fee monthly for all services needed by a patient. If care costs more, the provider loses money.

"We basically coordinate care," said Dr. Patricia Coon, a Billings Clinic specialist in geriatric medicine. "The goal is to take care of these individuals and keep them in their homes. It's a team approach."

These folks are "on the cusp of going into nursing homes," said Coon, who has been the PACE medical director since it started. She recently has been joined by another geriatric specialist, Dr. Irene Lohkamp, who is becoming the director.

In the past 2-½ years, PACE has served patients ranging in age from 56 to 95. Its current patients include veterans of World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam War, Bowman said.

According to a Dec. 20 article in the Washington Post, more than 23,000 people are enrolled in PACE at 166 sites in 29 states. The Billings Clinic program is the only one in Montana. However, if the state continues the program, there certainly could be other PACEs established in Montana.

Consider the Dec. 16 Gazette front-page headline about the “graying of Montana”. Montana is fast becoming one of the oldest population states in the Union. How will we provide needed services to so many more seniors? PACE provides part of the answer.

We ask all Yellowstone County lawmakers to unite in support of PACE — for the sake of your constituents and for the future of better health in Montana.

Rep. Don Roberts, R-Billings, the only member from Yellowstone County serving on the appropriations committee, chairs the Health and Human Services Subcommittee. We expect that he is hearing about the benefits of PACE. We call on the rest of the Yellowstone County delegation to ensure that other subcommittee members understand the value of PACE.

Gazette readers can speak up, too. Call or e-mail a message to lawmakers as suggested in the box at right.

Let's keep PACE for elderly, ailing veterans and other community members. In so doing, we will also save taxpayers money.

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