

The Super Committee Needs to Know What's at Stake for Older Floridians

This fall, between now and Thanksgiving, just 12 Americans will be making decisions with profound consequences for the rest of us. Those 12 members of Congress—six Democrats and six Republicans—make up the congressionally appointed “Super Committee” established by the debt ceiling deal in early August. The Super Committee is tasked with developing a plan to cut another \$1.5 trillion off the federal deficit.

The Super Committee’s challenge would build upon the nearly \$1 trillion in spending cuts Congress already approved in the summer debt deal. In that first round, programs like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security were spared the chopping block. However, other programs—*discretionary* programs where Congress determines funding through the annual appropriations process—that provide vital aging services, such as the Older Americans Act, were put at risk.

But now, everything is on the Super Committee’s table—from cutting or drastically restructuring entitlement programs like Medicare or Medicaid, to making even deeper cuts in the discretionary programs seniors depend upon. The only way to protect these vital programs is to consider a balanced approach that puts raising revenues firmly on the table too.

Here’s just one important discretionary program on the chopping block and what will happen if it is cut. The Older Americans Act, or OAA, provides older adults with much-needed services that include home care, home-delivered and congregate meals, adult day care, transportation, and caregiver support among many others. This system reflects how people want to age—at home and in the community. It also helps older Floridians avoid the unnecessary and more expensive institutional care that typically results in people “spending down” to Medicaid eligibility. OAA provides services and supports to many of Florida’s 4,454,625 senior residents like the family of Mr. “D” who appreciates the Adult Day Care services he receives from Palm Beach County’s Division of Senior Services. They report the Lake Worth center and staff – “It’s a Godsend.”

What gets lost in the heated rhetoric of “revenues vs. cuts” is the effect these changes will have on everyday older Floridians and their families. If community-based safety net programs get shredded by another round of deep cuts or allowed to stagnate under restrictive spending caps that don’t take into consideration our rapidly aging nation’s demographics, the health and well-being of the 1.3 million vulnerable Florida seniors will pay the price through reduced health, well-being and independence. Hurting seniors is a disturbing consequence but also consider who *else* pays the price: family caregivers and taxpayers.

The family caregivers who are doing their best to help Mom or Dad continue to live at home would also be hurt by cuts. Reduced services mean more work, financial strain and worry for them. Given that family caregivers are the single largest source of long-term care, we must find every possible way to support their efforts, not undermine them.

We must remember that cutting programs does not always result in savings for taxpayers. When at-risk older adults don’t get the help they need to remain in their homes and communities, the next step is usually a nursing home at several times the cost. Few older adults have the resources to fund this care for very long, which means even long-time middle class seniors often end up spending down to Medicaid, which is paid for with federal and state dollars. If there are fewer rides to the doctor or nutritious meals delivered to the homebound, the negative health outcomes will be suffered by the individuals, but also borne by taxpayers in the form of higher Medicare expenditures.

So taxpayers, how would you like to help your community's most frail older adults live out their lives? In their own homes with a few targeted services here and there to maintain their health and independence, or in a much more expensive institutional setting? And while we are at it, how would YOU like to age?

Here's some good news. There's still time to let members of Congress—and the Super Committee—know that Floridians are looking for a deficit reduction plan that is balanced and that does not make additional cuts that disproportionately harm programs that older adults depend upon to stay healthy and independent in their communities. If revenues are not on the table, there will likely be drastic cuts to safety net programs.

Cutting programs like these that provide critical home and community-based services to more than 534,333 OAA clients in Florida places the burden of deficit reduction on the most vulnerable among us. It is hardly shared sacrifice or a balanced approach. We can do better than that.

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