

*I'm Wendy Peterson and I represent the Senior Services Coalition, a coalition of 40 community-based organizations that serve seniors in Alameda County.*

A decade of federal and state budget cuts, plus the increasing number and acuity level of seniors needing services, continues to strain Alameda County's safety net for seniors. Last year, the county was able to step in with emergency stabilization funding and funding to backfill Federal sequester cuts that helped to maintain service levels and stave off cutbacks in services contracted through the Area Agency on Aging. Our thanks to the Board and Agencies for doing that... It's a great relief that the county funding will be in place for a second year.

But that funding will be allocated differently. In order to address a significant increase in the number of seniors needing meals on wheels, a portion of the stabilization dollars have been shifted, and the Sequester cuts that affect only a few programs have not been addressed. Coalition members applaud county leaders for addressing a clear crisis. But it came at a cost, and for Fiscal 15/16 some programs will receive augmentation that is less than what is needed to address the increased costs of doing business. This highlights the problematic nature of using a fixed pot of one-time-only funding to try to address a crisis that is rooted in population changes and economic reality.

One-time-only funding doesn't work for programs needing to hire staff to deliver services and maintain efforts beyond a 12 month horizon. Nor does it work for the growing number of seniors who need services – their needs won't end with the fiscal year. And a fixed funding amount doesn't address the underlying instability that led CBOs to beg for emergency funding last year. They were suffering from over a decade of increases to the cost of doing business with no corresponding funding increases or COLAs. They face the same trend into the future. If we don't address the need to stabilize services, we will continue to chase one crisis after another, and robbing peter to pay paul.

The ambitious county planning process that is now underway will deliver recommendations in May of 2016, much too late to implement changes that would impact the need for funding in Fiscal 16/17. But frankly, no plan will alleviate the need for an ongoing commitment to invest county dollars in senior services, and to maintain that investment over time with cost of living adjustments. We have these services in our county because of the critical role they play in helping older adults stay stable, avoid acute crises and live at home... If we want to maintain these services, we have to invest in them. We can't wait until May to be sure the funding is in place for the next year.