Gerontology expert joins NMSU

Wagner is Health and Social Services associate dean

The New Mexico State University College of Health and Social Services recently hired Dr. Donna Wagner, a gerontology expert with years of experience in the field, to serve as associate dean of academic affairs. Wagner also will stay involved with social work teaching and research.

Wagner comes to NMSU from Towson University in Maryland. As the founding director of that university’s gerontology program and as a tenured professor of health science and gerontology, Wagner also directed an undergraduate and a master’s program in applied gerontology.

“My ongoing research agenda has focused on the intersection of caregiving and work, community-residing elders, aging policy and community planning,” Wagner said. “Currently, I am completing, with a co-author, a textbook for undergraduate students about the Aging Network and developing a policy paper relating to older family caregivers. After the textbook is complete, my next project is a text on planning for healthy, aging communities.”

DONNA WAGNER, NMSU College of Health and Social Services

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Friday, January 21, 2011

Medicaid

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Medicaid basics

The facts are these. The program’s costs have been rising for years, with New Mexico’s spending on the program expected to increase to more than $850 million for the year that starts July 1, or slightly above this year’s funding levels. That’s because both Gov. Susana Martinez and the Legislature’s budget arm, the Legislative Finance Committee, have recommended replacing the $300 million or so of federal Medicaid aid that is disappearing next year.

Medicaid spending will represent nearly 16 percent of the state’s $5.4 billion state budget.

In some ways, Medicaid is a catchall program for the poor.

Children make up more than half of the individuals covered by the program – 352,000 in June 2010, according to the LFC. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of the state’s low-income adults have their prescription drug costs paid, their vision and hearing checked and some – parents of young children at risk for development disabilities – are notified of potential developmental problems after their children are tested.

“When very young children don’t get the support they need, they don’t realize their potential,” said Susan-nah Burke, executive director of PB&J Family Services, whose agency worked with 1,400 families last year thanks in part to Medicaid funding.

Burke worries about what cuts to Medicaid would mean for the families her agency serves.

Without the needed support, “They are on track for poor physical outcomes, for poor emotional outcomes, on track for poor educational outcomes. These are things we can prevent,” she said.

Adult services come up for possible cuts

So far, it appears no one is proposing cuts to Medicaid funding for children. The LFC has

Medicaid

Recommended eliminating several adult services – vision care, physical and occupational therapy and hearing services.

Also up for discussion is charging premiums to certain low-income adults participating in New Mexico’s State Coverage Insurance program, which is funded by Medicaid.

The LFC budget proposal also as-sumes additional savings by Marti-nez’s administration once they iden-tify other efficiencies.

The proposed cost-saving mea-sures have led to concerned mur-murings among advocates and some lawmakers who worry about how the cuts will play out in people’s day-to-day lives.

“I guess you could call them op-tional,” Stireesha Manne, a staff at-torney at Albuquerque-based New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, said of the LFC’s proposed budget cuts. “But from our perspective they are medically necessary.”

Vision care, physical therapy and hearing services aren’t on a list of mandatory services the federal gov-ernment requires states to cover.

Neither is dental care. They are “optional,” Feldman said.

“We have a lot of optional bene-fits that we provide that are optional in name only,” said Feldman.

Dental care, for example, “is the canary in the coal mine. It is an indicator of premature birth,” the Albu-querque senator said.

“Is that penny wise and pound foolish” to cut dental care, Feldman asked, although dental care doesn’t appear to be targeted. “Or is that a valid?”

Sen. Gay Kernan, R-Hobbs, seemed to capture the dilemma that state lawmakers might find them-selves in starting today.

“We expanded, and now it’s very difficult to pull back after people have been on these services,” Kernan said of previous years when New Mexico was flush with money and expanded Medicaid. “I appreciate that other, greater need out there. We want to protect Medicaid as well as education. That’s the general con-sensus. But if there’s no money…”

Kernan didn’t finish the sentence. It’s up to the Legislature to finish that thought.