

Medi-Cal recipient, 101, evicted from Santa Rosa assisted living facility for being unable to pay

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Mabel Barnfield, like most people, probably never thought she'd live to be 101, and she clearly did not expect to be paying nearly \$7,000 a month to be living in a senior residential care facility.

The expense drained her of all the money she had after selling her modest home in Santa Rosa's Holland Heights neighborhood in 2013. By November of last year, all Barnfield could afford to give Brookdale Fountaingrove, the assisted living facility, was her monthly Social Security check of about \$1,300 — it wasn't enough.

"How do you plan for that? It's an awful lot of money every month," said Barnfield's younger sister, Betty James, 90, of Santa Rosa.

On April 18, Barnfield, who suffers from dementia, was wheeled into Sonoma County eviction court on Cleveland Avenue. With her bank account drained, the former real estate agent was now receiving Medi-Cal, the state's version of Medicaid health insurance, which the private-pay Brookdale did not accept.

Barnfield's close friends started calling many of the 19 skilled nursing homes in Sonoma County that do accept Medi-Cal, but none would take her. During a break in her eviction proceedings, her Sonoma County Legal Aid attorney and Brookdale's attorneys located a bed in Novato, and she was taken there the next day.

Barnfield is unique in that she's lived longer than most people, senior advocates say. But her predicament — running out of money and relying on federal health insurance that advocates claim skilled nursing homes avoid — is one an increasing number of people will face as a large share of the population continues to age.

Crista Nelson, executive director of Senior Advocacy Services, a regional agency that runs the Sonoma County Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, said Medi-Cal reimbursements are far lower than what skilled nursing homes get from Medicare, which covers a resident's medical needs and also can be used for expensive physical therapy. Because of that, she said, nursing homes will try to limit the number of Medi-Cal residents they take in.

It's a claim strongly rejected by the trade association that represents most of the skilled nursing homes in California.

Deborah Pacyna, a spokeswoman for the California Association of Health Facilities, said statewide admissions records show that 15% of residents in skilled nursing homes are on Medicare, while 73% are on Medi-Cal or Medi-Cal-managed care plans.

"It's hard to argue that facilities are limiting access when 3 out of every 4 patients is obtaining health care coverage through Medi-Cal," Pacyna said in an email.

Pacyna said the Bay Area, in general, is among the most affected regions in California for available skilled nursing beds because of its dense population and the lack of new nursing home construction. High real estate costs and excessive regulation by the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development inhibits new construction, she said.

"In Sonoma County alone, there are just 1,400 beds to serve a half million people and an exploding elderly population," Pacyna said.

According to Nelson, who runs the county's Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, Sonoma County is home to 21 skilled nursing and 169 assisted living facilities. Assisted living facilities or long-term care facilities are not covered by Medicare or Medi-Cal because they technically are not medical beds, she said.