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State should not be re-directing health care funds to other budget areas

by **Stuart H. Shapiro**

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Pennsylvania will receive nearly \$4 billion in additional federal Medicaid funds over the next 22 months as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Inclusion of these funds in the stimulus package is in response to pleas from the National Governors Association, chaired by Gov. Ed Rendell, calling on Congress to help states preserve access to health care for children, struggling families, the disabled and the elderly.

Now that the stimulus funds have begun arriving, Governor Rendell and state lawmakers should use those funds -- as well as already pledged state Medicaid dollars -- to shore up and preserve a fraying safety net that cares for Pennsylvania's neediest residents, starting with the elderly.

In trying economic times, limited funding must be targeted where it is needed most.

Some governors have stated that they plan to use state funds slated for Medicaid to plug other budget holes instead, now that additional federal Medicaid dollars are on the way.

But Pennsylvania cannot afford to follow that lead.

Our state is on the verge of a fiscal tsunami when it comes to caring for the elderly.

We are among the nation's oldest and most rapidly aging states.

By the very nature of most social programs, demand for services increases when times are tough.

We already know that the number of uninsured adults is rising as hard-working Pennsylvanians are losing their jobs and, hence, their health insurance.

Despite the robust growth of home and community care for seniors and the disabled during the last few years, the need for these vital services also continues to grow.

As acting Secretary of Aging Mike Hall told a reporter recently, the governor's flat funding of senior services in his proposed 2009-10 budget is recognition that demographic shifts are only going to increase the need to assist the older population.

A report from the state Hospital and Health System Association revealed that from 42 percent to 68 percent of hospitals, depending on their location in the commonwealth, have indicated they are finding "capacity for skilled nursing care an impediment to timely and appropriate discharge of patients to post-acute settings" problematic or very problematic.

This is driven, in significant measure, by low Medicaid reimbursement for nursing homes.

Because Medicaid is a state and federal match program, the more state money that is invested in health care, the more federal money flows into our commonwealth.

And at a time when many hardworking families and seniors are finding themselves in desperate economic situations, it is vital that Pennsylvania preserve access to health care and health services.

There are still enormous challenges ahead.

But health care money should be used for health-care purposes. Anything less puts at risk those who need help the most.

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