

The Arizona Republic

Funding cuts cripple senior employment program

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Budget cuts to a federal program that helps organizations serving seniors has thwarted some metro Phoenix agencies' efforts to assist some of the city's most impoverished elders, agency leaders say.

Since 1965, the federal Senior Community Service Employment Program has helped fund agencies across the country that provide poverty-stricken seniors job training while paying them a minimum wage.

But an estimated 45 percent budget cut to the federal program, which took effect this month, has caused some agencies to place qualifying seniors on waiting lists and reduce the paid hours for current participants - 90 percent of whom live at the federal poverty level, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

"We're scrambling," said Yolanda Locher, Area Agency on Aging program director in Phoenix, which has 109 seniors in its SCSEP. "If we don't give them training, if they don't get employment, then they're going to be on street," she said. "They need this training so they can be self-sufficient."

She said her SCSEP budget was slashed from \$1.47 million last fiscal year to \$549,169.

Goodwill of Central Arizona's funding was cut from \$1.28 million last fiscal year to \$960,360, said Yolanda Carrothers, workforce development vice president for Goodwill of Central Arizona in Phoenix. Her program serves 104 seniors.

Both programs have lessened participants' hours and reduced the number of enrollees. Participants must be within 125 percent of the federal poverty level - about \$1,134 monthly per individual participant - to qualify for as long as four years, Locher said.

Locher recently notified program participants via mail of a reduction in their paid hours.

Vietnam War veteran Sharon Clouse, 65, received a letter.

"I called (Locher) and said, 'You can't do that to me. I'll lose \$120 a month,' " Clouse said. "When that's all you've got plus Social Security, that's a lot of money."

As a single mother, Clouse worked three jobs at a time in the 1970s after the war to feed her two kids and later became the primary guardian for her granddaughter. She said she gets \$650 monthly from Social Security. Even with the \$7.35 hourly wage she received from the SCSEP, it was barely enough to get by.

"It was hell," she said. "But I put my pride in my pocket to make a little money and kept going. ... I've only got me to take care of myself."

SCSEP serves about 90,000 seniors annually. It received about \$450 million this year, a decrease from \$825 million the previous year, according to the U.S. Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services budgets.

Locher said her waiting list has more than doubled to 200 seniors in the past year. She fields dozens of calls and walk-ins daily with only one other full-time employee.

In addition to providing job training, the program helps clients access their Social Security benefits; works with them on cover letters, resumes and interview tips; offers fuel and public-transportation subsidies; and helps them purchase appropriate clothing for job interviews, Locher said.

Kirk Moss, 60, was a participant in Locher's program. That helped him secure funding to enroll at Arizona Automotive Institute in Glendale, where he's scheduled to graduate in December. He was concerned that the cuts would cost him his transportation subsidy.

A convicted felon, Moss said attending school later in life has kept him off the streets.

"It wasn't me that turned my life around, it was Area Agency," he said.

Still, some question using government funding for non-profit organizations and agencies that assist with job training and creation.

"We're entering an era where people are skeptical of the government responding to social problems," said Lee McPheters, an economist at Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business. "Politicians have to respond to the political climate as they see it, and there is a widespread view that government spending relative to revenue is out of balance."

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the fiscally conservative think tank Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., said that job creation and charitable programs should come from the private sector.

"We see the jobs that the government creates, but we don't see the taxes or funds that prevent more job creation and financially burden the government," Tanner said. "These programs aren't free."

For Clouse, financial security as a senior citizen is paramount, and she's thankful Locher helped her transition to a new apartment.

"I said, 'The most important thing I need is a bed,' " she said.

Locher helped her get a bed and secure steady employment as a certified nursing assistant, earning \$9.50 per hour.

"I'm moving up in the world. I'm trying to get myself back on my feet . . . but I can't do any more than society allows me," she said. "It'll put food on the table and get me started. You've got to find a way to get started again. You lose your groove, but you've got to get it back."

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<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/business/articles/2011/07/15/20110715senior-employment-program-cuts.html#ixzz1SB4NWEIW>