

## A loss for living independently

### With state-funded in-home care drying up, home life might no longer be an option for 70 area seniors

By Lillian Mongeau / *The Bulletin*

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SISTERS —

Carol Illinik, 81, lives alone in her modest Sisters home, with two cats for company. Her husband of 42 years, Robert Illinik, 87, had to move last summer after his health had deteriorated to the point that she could no longer care for him. While he still was living at home, Robert and Carol Illinik depended on Oregon Project Independence to aid them with most of the in-home services they needed to make it possible for them to stay in their home.

“I honestly don’t know what I would have done without that extra help,” Carol Illinik said.

For more than 30 years, seniors like Carol and Robert Illinik have depended on OPI to help them with basic tasks, like vacuuming, that allow them to stay in their homes. Now, that safety net is disappearing. The program will end Aug. 1, the Central Oregon Council on Aging announced last week, because of state budget cuts.

Currently, 70 Central Oregon seniors who cannot afford private care use the program for help with housework, yardwork, meals, bathing and help with tasks like sorting prescription medications. About 20 people are on the waiting list for these services.

“It may not seem like a large number, but these are pretty frail seniors who need daily assistance (to stay in their homes),” said Pamela Knorr, executive director of COCOA.

The Oregon Department of Human Services halted the program after Gov. Ted Kulongoski authorized a 9 percent reduction to the state general fund in June. The way the



Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

Carol Illinik with her cat BB at her home in Sisters. “All the responsibilities that we shared, that we had help for, are now on me alone,” says Illinik, 81, now that her husband lives at Redmond Health Care Center and she no longer receives any state support.

cut was structured meant DHS had to specifically target state-funded programs and could not substitute funds slashed from one division to make up for cuts in another. OPI, which falls under the Seniors & People with Disabilities program, received the largest single cut, more than \$7 million.

“All of the in-home care is very important to seniors and people who count on it,” said Patty Wentz, with DHS. She added that programs that provide in-home services for people with disabilities were cut significantly as well.

“I do not believe there are any programs that are funded 100 percent by the (state) general fund that were not reduced or eliminated,” Wentz said.

For some local seniors, OPI has been a saving grace in tough times.

Robert Illinik taught vocational education in California for about 30 years.

“He was go, go, go — always two steps ahead,” Carol Illinik said.

After major heart surgery in the late '90s, Robert Illinik was never quite the same, his wife said. In 2003, he began to lose his mental faculties. He got incrementally worse for six years. Finally, in July 2009, he was moved to the Redmond Health Care Center, where he lives now.

Carol Illinik said it meant a lot to them for Robert to be able to stay home as long as possible. Without Oregon Project Independence, she said, that would not have been possible.

“I think I probably could have done it, but I think mentally or physically, I would have gone down,” she said.

During the time she was caring for her husband, Carol Illinik was diagnosed with and treated for breast cancer. Then she had to have back surgery, which left her unable to do housework such as vacuuming.

“You work,” she said, alluding to the Illiniks' life philosophy. She said Robert worked his way through college and then every day since graduating until his retirement. She worked, too, as a secretary, teacher, artist and writer. Despite this, the couple's income from Social Security and various retirement sources was not enough



Photos by Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

Carol Illinik, 81, walks her cat BB around her home in Sisters. For more than 30 years, seniors like Illinik have depended on the soon-to-be cut Oregon Project Independence program to help them with basic tasks like vacuuming that allow them to stay in their homes.



Photos by Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

Carol Illinik, 81, walks her cat BB around her home in Sisters. For more than 30 years, seniors like Illinik have depended on the soon-to-be cut Oregon Project Independence program to help them with basic tasks like vacuuming that allow them to stay in their homes.

to cover the care they needed from 2006 to 2009.

“Believe me, to go on any kind of charity — I fought and fought and fought it,” Carol Illinik said. “We were always the ones to give it, and I never thought we were doing enough.”

#### *Cost savings*

One of the aspects of OPI that has garnered attention and awards since its beginning in 1975 is that it costs far less to provide in-home services than to pay for residential treatment in an assisted living facility or nursing home. Knorr, with COCOA, said in-home services can be up to 10 times cheaper than residential services.

Wentz, at DHS, confirmed this, but said the nature of the cut meant it wasn't necessarily relevant since other funding sources, some of them federal, covered residential care.

“The Legislature created OPI and funded it with state dollars, which is a great thing to do, but whenever there's a cut, it's vulnerable,” Wentz said.

She said there was no chance of re-funding the program without a significant increase in the state general fund or an extension of the federal stimulus plan. Neither is expected, Wentz said.

#### *What now?*

In Central Oregon, OPI is administered by COCOA, which contracts with local in-home care companies to provide services. Nancy Webre, owner and CEO of once such company, Evergreen In-Home Care Services, said she had been working in aging services for 34 years and sees OPI as a critically important program for many seniors.

“It's really been a vital program in terms of keeping people at home,” Webre said. “They don't fall between the cracks.”

Webre said some families losing OPI support are hoping to cover the cost of her company's services by combining forces to help out a parent. Other families were taking on the care themselves, Webre said. The growing unemployment rate has meant more people have the time to provide care for an aging parent than would have a few years ago, Webre added.



Carol and Robert Illinik were married in 1968 and moved to Sisters in the late '80s. When Robert's health began to decline in the late '90s, the Illiniks relied on services provided by the Oregon Project Independence to enable Robert to continue living at home for years. Carol Illinik says she doesn't know what she would have done without OPI, which ends Aug. 1. Robert now lives at Redmond Health Care Center.

## Contact COCOA

The Central Oregon Council on Aging asks for donations: Visit [www.councilonaging.org](http://www.councilonaging.org) and click on the “Contribute” tab at the top, or send a check to COCOA's office at 1135 S.W. Highland Ave., Redmond, OR 97756. For more information or to volunteer, call 541-548-8817.

Still other families and seniors will have to look at the possibility of long-term residential care, often paid for by Medicaid.

“We are going to do our best to get our seniors as many services we can possibly connect them with,” Knorr said of the 70 seniors served in Central Oregon. She said case managers were working to get eligible seniors on Medicaid, to find volunteer care services and to notify local food banks about seniors who might need food to supplement the federal Meals on Wheels program many seniors qualify for.

For Robert Illinik, residential care was eventually the only option. He had become too ill for his wife to handle his care, and OPI's services were no longer enough. He qualified for Medicaid assistance when he reached the point of needing residential care, and that program is currently covering most of the cost of his care.

This may be the only option for more and more seniors, even if they could have stayed in their homes with some assistance, now that OPI won't be available.

Carol Illinik said her husband no longer asks to come home, but he did when he was first moved to the health care center.

“He would like to come home even now,” she said. “It was hard to hear, but he can't come home.”

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