# DISABLED ADULTS FEEL MEDICAID PINCH

## Texas' low reimbursement rates leave families struggling to find at-home care



*Sue Schnars braids daughter Ivana's hair at the Pflugerville Health Care Center. Schnars had a difficult time finding caregivers because of low Medicaid reimbursement rates. She wasn't able to care for her daughter by herself. [ANA RAMIREZ PHOTOS/AMERICAN STATESMAN]*

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Since 43-year-old Ivana Schnars moved into a nursing home in Pflugerville, her mom, Sue Schnars, has tried to make it as comfortable as the home where her daughter spent most of her life. Citrus essential oil perfumes the dorm like room. Relatives have left sweet messages on a white board. Pink decorations dot the walls.

Unable to care for Ivana Schnars, who is nonverbal and uses a wheelchair, on her own, Sue Schnars moved her out of their North Austin home in August.

Schnars had trouble finding and keeping caregivers for Ivana. With the state's Medicaid reimbursement, she could pay personal attendants only $11 an hour without

benefits.

“I agonized over this decision,” Schnars said. “She’s my daughter, and I love her. For 43 years, I kept her home. For 43 years, I was able to make sure she was safe and clean and that she had everything that she needed. People at the retirement home are wonderful, but they’re not me.”

Schnars is using her daughter’s Social Security income to pay for the nursing home.

The turnover rate among attendants is high across the country — 45 to 65 percent — but stagnant pay rates in Texas have worsened the problem here. Attendants in Texas are paid on average $9.30 an hour, while the nationwide average is $11.59, according to an August report by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission.

For nearly a decade, the state has not increased the payment rates of personal attendants in Community Living Assistance and Support Services, the Medicaid program that covered care for Ivana Schnars and 5,600 other Texans. The state sets the attendant rate in the program at about $13 an hour, but after administrative fees and payroll taxes are shaved off, the rate families can pay attendants is lower.

Additionally, the state cut the attendant rates of two other Medicaid programs for individuals with disabilities — Texas Home Living and Home and Community-based Services — by 21 percent last year to $17.73 an hour to align the rates with other Medicaid programs. The decision affected caregivers for about 8,000 people in both programs. Dozens of people with disabilities and their relatives had pleaded with the agency in a meeting last year to reconsider the cuts.

The cuts saved the state $26.6 million over a two-year period. Texas Home Living, which providers say has long been a financially difficult program to run, has been hardest hit by the cuts—19 providers have terminated contracts.

“On a business level, you can’t do something where every month you’re not paying your bills and you have to borrow from one program to pay for another program,” said Doug Svien of the Company Rock House, a Stephenville provider group that has stopped participating in the Texas Home Living program. “Maybe somebody out there

that can do it for less cost than I can do it, and God bless them."

Texas Health and Human Services Commission officials said they're working on improving retention and recruitment in Texas, including asking the Legislature to raise the pay for attendants. The agency estimates that it will spend $7.9 billion on community attendant services during the 2020-21 budget.

"We know long-term care providers in Texas have indicated they are facing difficulties recruiting and retaining the qualified community attendants needed to provide care. We are working to better capture data on attendant turnover and retention, which can be used to help determine effective strategies for improvement," a statement from the agency said.

'A really hard decision'

Ivana Schnars was born in Peru, where her parents were social workers in the 1970s. She was developing normally until a vims attacked her brain, leading to cerebral palsy.

Sue Schnars, who recently retired from her job as a special education administrator for the Pflugerville school district, had for years relied on attendants to feed her daughter, read to her, change her clothes and take her on outings, among other activities. More recently, she relied on them the most to help carry her, something the 61-year-old can no longer do.

Amy Gayer -Byles, Ivana Schnars' caregiver for seven years, struggled to make ends meet. A part-time Austin Community College student saddled with a car note, Gayer Byles would forgo doctors' appointments and often not use electricity in her apartment and skip meals to pay her bills. Although she loved Schnars — it's evident by a scrapbook she made of their time together that now sits in Schnars' room at the nursing home — Gayer-Byles needed to support a family, so she quit.

"That was a really hard decision," Gayer-Byles said.

"There's no other words," Gayer-Byles said through tears. "You're talking about real

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