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OUR VIEW/ LONG-TERM ASSISTANCE

Time is right to lift Family Care freeze

We are encouraged that Gov. Scott Walker has indicated he might lift the freeze on the expansion of Family Care by the end of the year.

This is a long-term care alternative program that, if properly administered, would give elderly people and adults with developmental or physical disabilities the option of receiving care in their homes or through community programs, rather than through more expensive nursing homes.

Family Care is functioning in all but 15 counties in the state, with seven of the counties — Brown, Door, Kewaunee, Shawano, Menominee, Oconto and Marinette — among those

waiting for state approval to launch the program.

We believe the program is needed for Brown County and the other six counties that comprise the Northeast Wisconsin Family Care district. An additional benefit is the anticipated cost savings to taxpayers who currently support the waiver program.

If approved, it would give families options for assistance, such as transportation, home health care and nutrition services.

The program, whose funding was included in the 2011-2013 biennial budget, was scheduled to become operational in the seven counties in March 2012 but was put on hold after a Leg-

islative Audit Bureau report — which praised the program and cited cost savings — raised some questions about the program's oversight.

Despite an enrollment freeze on the program statewide, Walker approved \$1.4 billion for Family Care in each year of the biennium. The state is reviewing the program and both Walker and state Department of Health Services Secretary Dennis Smith hinted the freeze might be lifted by the end of the year.

The sooner that happens the better. Brown County officials will need at least a year before Family Care could become operational here and would need sufficient planning funds from

the state. If the freeze is lifted by Jan. 1, 2012, implementation in the seven counties wouldn't take place until the following year. That's a long time to keep local families waiting.

Brian Shoup, director of the Brown County human services department, said Tuesday that the county will plan to continue its current waiver program for the balance of the biennium and said a department analysis last year indicated Family Care would eventually be cheaper.

Family Care was in the planning stages when the state put enrollment on hold. More than 1,000 people had already registered for the program in the seven counties before the enrollment freeze was ordered.

Helen Marks Dicks, associate director for advocacy-state issues for the American Association for Retired People Wisconsin, said failure of the state to move forward with Family Care would be expensive. More tax dollars would be directed to nursing home residents with low-care needs rather than to the less-expensive home and community services, she said.

We commend the governor for doing his due diligence to be certain Family Care is efficient and cost-effective. We hope the state, upon resolving its questions about Family Care, will lift the enrollment freeze soon so that many people in our region may be served by this important program.