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THE HEATING UP ISSUE

Keeping a tiff from turning into a lawsuit

Nonprofit provides mediations for seniors

BY ASHLEY ARCHIBALD
Daily Press Staff Writer

FOURTH STREET A nonprofit that provides services to seniors announced a new program Tuesday that will help older adults and their families solve difficult disputes before they escalate to the court system.

The Elder Care Mediation program is a collaboration between WISE & Healthy Aging and the nonprofit Center for Civic Mediation, an affiliate of the Los Angeles County Bar Association.

The association will provide trained mediators — including lawyers, therapists and social workers — to meet with families to talk through issues like the care and treatment of their senior family member.

Unlike a court case, which has a winner and a loser, mediation allows parties to come to an agreement that works for both sides. The process still ends in a legally binding document, said Molly Davies, vice president of the organization's Elder Abuse Prevention and Ombudsman Services.

"WISE & Healthy Aging has been interested in mediation and what it could do for the clients that we serve particularly because

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in some of the programs that we have, we see different points of conflict that maybe a legal remedy is too strong or costly," Davies said.

That can happen when a senior is no longer able to express their needs or desires, leaving family members to figure out what is best for them. The problem is that under California law, each family member has an equal say in the fate of their parent, Davies said.

"They can go to court and become a conservator and make those kinds of medical decisions, but that is very costly," Davies said. "Or, you can try mediation first."

Mediators will meet with the families in a private, confidential setting, listen to all sides of the dispute and try to forge a mutually beneficial solution. The downside to media-

tion is that all sides have to agree to come to the table.

The Elder Care Mediation program will be available at the WISE & Healthy Aging office at 1527 Fourth St. on Mondays between 1 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. The initial meeting is actually a consultation, after which the mediator will try to contact any other people involved in the situation.

The consultation is free and the first three hours of the service are also free. There may be a cost after that, Davies said.

It's a "bit of a process," Davies said, but the end goal can be better for the senior and family members alike.

"We're really excited about it," Davies said. "It's a much-needed service. I think there are a lot of instances when mediation could be utilized and people don't think about it."