

Another View

... as Bush, Rendell cut support of 'frailest seniors'

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They may reside on different ends of the political spectrum, but President George W. Bush and Gov. Edward G. Rendell have one thing in common: Both have abandoned their obligation to cover the real costs of care for residents in Pennsylvania's nursing homes.

President Bush's \$3.1 trillion budget proposes significant cuts that disproportionately affect our "Greatest Generation," and Gov. Rendell's proposed \$28.3 billion budget, which, given inflation, includes no increase in funding for nursing homes' most ill and elderly patients, is a cut of similar magnitude. This one-two punch jeopardizes the ability of Pennsylvania's poorest, frailest elderly to receive the level of care we all expect for our loved ones. Unfortunately, this chronic underfunding is nothing new.

The national accounting firm BDO Seidman/Eljay LLC reported last year that in 2006, Pennsylvania shortchanged these senior care providers an average of \$12 per resident per day, or more than \$4,300 per resident per year. Over the last three budget cycles, the Rendell administration has paid \$287 million less than it owed for the care of Medical Assistance residents in nursing homes.

Two out of three nursing home residents are on Medical Assistance in Pennsylvania, and the cost of caring for these individuals is increasing as their sickness levels rise. Nursing home costs increased 27 percent between 2001 and 2005; Medical Assistance reimbursements during that time increased 18 percent. As a result, many nursing homes are struggling to meet their medical, physical and social needs of residents. Caregivers' wages and benefits are being affected, and private-pay residents are being asked to pay more -- a hidden tax -- to make up the difference in government underfunding.

We commend the governor for wanting to expand home and community-based care for low-income residents who aren't sick enough to need a nursing home. But, we're not served if we build a strong home health system and then fail to adequately support skilled nursing care facilities when home care no longer meets the needs of the patient.

Staying at home is certainly desirable and probably the best option for many, but it can also be the worst option for those who truly need the constant attention and care that only a nursing home can provide.

To care for our growing numbers of older Pennsylvanians, we need to create a robust long-term care continuum that provides appropriate levels of care in the most appropriate setting at every stage of life.

Last month, a new coalition, "Pennsylvanians for Quality Care," launched a statewide campaign to ensure our frailest seniors get the care they deserve. The coalition comprises PANPHA, PACAH and PHCA; care administrators; their staff; residents and their families.

Gov. Ed Rendell is preaching the need to provide all state residents with the proper health care. A noble idea. Yet, even if his "Cover All Pennsylvanians" plan passes, it will never truly be a success if the elderly who need nursing home care are forgotten.

All of us understand that with every budget, difficult choices need to be made. But Gov. Rendell's proposal to freeze Medical Assistance for the frailest of the elderly in our nursing homes makes a bad situation even worse.

This generation of Pennsylvania residents has paid its dues. Many served in World War II and the Korean War. When it comes to dividing up limited state resources, our Greatest Generation should be at the front of the line. They should not be asked to ante-up again, which is exactly what the Rendell and Bush proposed budgets do.

In the past, the governor has been quick to criticize President Bush for his domestic policy failures, and for not providing enough federal support for programs that help our frailest seniors. He would be wise to avoid making the same mistake. We shouldn't balance the cost of other initiatives on the backs of Pennsylvania's nursing home residents.

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