

Another View

Don't pass buck for CHIP to nursing home elderly

By Stuart H. Shapiro and Paul R. Langevin Jr.

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Every child in America should have access to health care. Thankfully, both the U.S. House and Senate have passed plans that would reauthorize and expand the federal Children's Health Insurance Plan. But, funds to expand child health care should not come at the expense of America's historical and fundamental commitment to our elderly. That's exactly what happened in the House, where many members, including U.S. Rep. Charles W. Dent, were forced to choose between kids and the elderly when voting on House Bill 3162.

While the legislation contained the noble goal of expanding insurance for children, it also included many destructive components, including a provision to slash \$2.7 billion in Medicare payments. Under that plan, nursing home residents in New Jersey and Pennsylvania would lose \$210 million over five years.

Cuts of this magnitude threaten the future viability and capacity of the nation's long-term care infrastructure at a time when 77 million baby boomers are on the verge of retirement and thinking about how to obtain and pay for health-care services.

In Pennsylvania and New Jersey, where roughly 80 percent of nursing home residents have their care funded through Medicaid and Medicare, the cuts would hit especially hard and exacerbate an existing funding gap between what Medicaid will reimburse nursing homes for caring for residents. In Pennsylvania and New Jersey, where two out of three residents are funded through Medicaid, nursing homes lose an average of \$13 and \$21.25 per resident per day, respectively.

Medicare traditionally has propped up underfunding by Medicaid, so Medicare cuts will affect the entire 80 percent of residents who rely on both federal programs for their care. Last year alone, Medicaid underfunding grew to \$4.5 billion annually, according to the national accounting firm BDO Seidman.

While nursing homes will strive to provide quality health care no matter what funding cuts come their way, they will be forced to scale back those activities and events that enhance residents' quality of life. In addition, those who work within America's nursing homes -- predominantly women and many minorities -- could find their wages and benefits affected by the cuts proposed in House Bill 3162.

Nursing homes already are struggling to attract and retain staff to care for elderly, ill and disabled residents because these positions involve high physical and emotional stress on

employees who can find higher compensation in competing health-care settings. Right now, 100,000 long-term care nurse and nurse aide jobs remain vacant nationwide; annual turnover rates are high -- 49 percent for registered nurses and 71 percent for certified nursing assistants.

Slashing Medicare payments would complicate the challenges that already face each and every one of the more than 175,000 nursing home employees in New Jersey and Pennsylvania who work long, demanding hours to care for those least able to care for themselves.

Moreover, efforts to modernize and refurbish aging facilities and equipment, acquire and implement new technologies to accommodate advances in medical practices, and meet the increasingly complex care and rehabilitative needs of New Jersey and Pennsylvania's oldest seniors will be severely constrained.

We say the effects of the proposed cuts in House Bill 3162 are very real -- on the patients, on those who care for them, and on the families who rely on these facilities to be a safe harbor for elderly loved ones.

Cutting money to nursing home residents is not the right way to fund expanded health care for children. Both our children and our Greatest Generation's most vulnerable and ill seniors deserve quality health care. Congressional legislators can demonstrate their commitment to both the young and old when the House and Senate versions of the legislation are reconciled in conference committee next month.

Sufficient funding of health-care services for children and the elderly is the only responsible solution. Playing off the future of children against the well-being of the elderly is not policy -- it's passing the buck.

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