

THE MORNING CALL

Your View: Why Nursing Home Care is at Risk in Pennsylvania

By ZACH SHAMBERG

| THE MORNING CALL |

MAY 07, 2019 | 9:00 AM



Zach Shamberg, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Health Care Association, says the state policy on Medicaid reimbursement is endangering the financial health of the state's senior care homes. (Getty Images)

My grandfather was diagnosed with dementia five years ago. It hasn't been easy on my family, especially my grandmother. But it was only recently that we had to make the most difficult decision we've ever had to make — one that so many other families in Pennsylvania with aging adults are forced to confront each year.

My grandmother could no longer safely care for my grandfather at home. She had cared for him as best she could, but he was becoming a risk to her and himself. We had to come together as a family, and through tears and grief, admit him into a nursing home.

What happened to my family isn't uncommon. **Pennsylvania ranks fourth nationally in the number of seniors among its population**, and the fastest-growing demographic group is Pennsylvanians age 85 and older, according to **The Center for Rural Pennsylvania**.



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So it would make sense that our commonwealth would ensure a sustainable, robust long-term care continuum for our grandparents, parents, families and friends, right?

Unfortunately, that's not the case. Believe it or not, these services are at risk.

For the fifth consecutive year, Gov. Tom Wolf proposed a state budget that included no funding increase for seniors on Medicaid in nursing homes, even as health care costs rise and the state's rapidly aging population needs more services.

My grandfather is now among them.

Many of these residents need help with clinically complex medical conditions. They require the constant attention of trained medical professionals to manage their health outcomes. Pennsylvania's nursing homes provide that care — 24 hours per day, 7 days per week.

But the cost of that care is rising, as are the costs for everything from labor to drugs and medical supplies to food and utilities.

State funding simply hasn't kept pace. And is it any wonder my family fought as long as we could to keep my grandfather at home?

Nursing homes today are reimbursed approximately \$8.24 per hour on average to care for a resident on Medicaid. Let that number sink in: an hour of care for your grandparent, parent or loved one is worth roughly the same price as a Burger King value meal.

The care nursing homes provide is high quality and comprehensive. Facilities offer nursing care and related services, specialized rehabilitative services, medically related social services, pharmaceutical services, dietary services personalized to the needs of each resident, emergency dental services, and nonemergency medical transportation.

But that level of care is simply unsustainable because of the dramatic funding shortfall.

With two-thirds of all nursing home residents — **or more than 52,000 seniors and individuals with disabilities — relying on Medicaid to pay for their care,** according to the state health department, the financial burden is overwhelming for providers.

Over the last three years, more than 100 nursing home providers in Pennsylvania have declared bankruptcy, changed ownership or reorganized. Some have left the state altogether. And it's not just Pennsylvania. **In Massachusetts, 20 nursing homes have closed due to inadequate reimbursement.**

In **Illinois** and **South Dakota**, providers are fleeing the state.

Is Pennsylvania next?

When my family was confronted with the decision to find care for my grandfather, we had options. We had choice. And today, I'm proud to say that he is being cared for by dedicated, hardworking staff who treat him as if he is a member of their family.

Unless our commonwealth invests in our seniors and long-term care services and makes the care of our families, friends and elders in nursing homes a priority again, other families may not be so lucky when the time comes for them to make the same decision.

Zach Shamberg is president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Health Care Association, a statewide advocacy organization for older residents and their providers of care.

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