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Nursing homes

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the state has become far more adversarial in its surveys of nursing homes in the past two years, she said. Meanwhile, it's becoming harder to retain nurses, who fear losing their licenses in the current climate, and to recruit workers who are already in demand in other, better-paying, less stressful areas of the health industry, she added.

Coupled with the factors deterring people from working in nursing homes are the relatively low state unemployment rates, along with the fact that women, who traditionally dominate in the nursing home industry, have far more employment options than they did 20 years ago, she said. On top of all this, the state wants to decrease funding to nursing homes at a time when the public wants improved services from them, she said, pointing out that St. Ann's itself has borrowed millions to upgrade its facilities.

When it came to views on the governor's proposed cuts, Mullin-DiProsa had a lot of company among her colleagues in the Catholic nursing home field. In addition to St. Ann's, the Diocese of Rochester is home to St. Joseph's Skilled Nursing Facility, a 71-bed facility located at St. Joseph's Hospital, Elmira; McAuley Manor at Mercycare, a 120-bed facility that primarily serves the elderly and is located at St. James Mercy Hospital, Hornell; and Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center, Auburn, a 297-bed facility sponsored by the Sisters of the Third Franciscan Order.

John L. Zehr, St. James' vice president, pointed out that the Medicaid cuts have been proposed at a time when his facility is spending money to upgrade itself — in part, to respond to community needs found by the state's Department of Health. Along those lines of thought, the state apparently wants to give less money to nursing homes yet regulate them more closely, noted Sister Marie Michael Miller, SSJ, nursing home administrator for St. Joseph's.

"It's ironic that they should be expecting us to be providing even higher quality care and not paying for what they want us to give," she said.

According to several sources, most nursing homes in New York derive 70 to 80 percent of their revenue from Medicaid. John F. Signor, director of public affairs for the state's health department, pointed out that New York allocates \$6 billion of Medicaid funds for nursing homes, the largest allocation of its kind in the country. This year, Gov. Pataki has proposed shifting more than \$320 million of this funding to such areas as children's and family health insurance and prescription drug coverage, Signor said in a phone interview from his Albany office. Driving the governor's proposal is the state's claim that nursing



homes statewide generated "record profits" of more than \$1.8 billion in the last five years. That figure includes surpluses generated by not-for-profit nursing homes.

"We ... believe that taxpayers should not be subsidizing billion-dollar profits on nursing homes," Signor said.

Opponents of the Medicaid cuts include the New York State Catholic Conference, which lobbies the legislature on behalf of the state's bishops, and NYAHS, which contradicts the claim that homes are generating record profits. In several statements, NYAHS claimed the state used shallow analysis of nursing home finances to come up with its figure, and stressed that a deeper analysis revealed that "most facilities' financial ratios — indicators of income, liquidity and creditworthiness — deteriorated from 1997 to 1999."

Under the gun

Although the financial situation of nursing homes may be debatable, industry officials and the state agree that nursing homes are under more intense scrutiny. Three of the Diocese of Rochester's four Catholic nursing homes — St. Ann's, Mercycare and Mercy Center — all were cited for deficiencies by state inspectors in the last year. However, as of the latest state surveys, all three were in "substantial compliance," meaning, in part, that no deficiencies are present that are likely to cause harm to residents. St. Joseph's facility has been deficiency-free for 11 years.

Nursing home administrators said they welcome the state's scrutiny of their facilities, but some added that they believed the state should focus on whether patients and residents are actually harmed by staff neglect and mistakes, and not on mere letter-of-the-law violations. Administrators both at the Jan. 31 hearing and in interviews pointed out that facilities have been cited for everything from bedsheets not properly folded to residents not properly robed because their garment got tripped up in a wheelchair.

On the other hand, spokespersons for residents' rights at the Jan. 31 conference pointed out that they have received more complaints about care in homes in recent

years. Ronni Abramovitz, who coordinates Monroe County's Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, said her office has seen complaints from residents at nursing homes and adult homes increase 26 percent between 1998 and 2000. On that note, Signor said the number of facilities fined by the state's health department almost doubled between 1999 and 2000. He stressed that "nursing homes in New York state are among the best in the nation," but added that his office plans to keep up its scrutiny of facilities.

"Our top priority is that the residents are receiving quality care," he said.

Mercy Center received media attention recently after the state denied all Medicare and Medicaid payments on patients admitted after Nov. 2. Among the problems the state found was a resident who lay in bed in her own feces and who was taken to lunch unwashed, unsanitary areas in the kitchen and the manner in which food was served.

The state reinstated payments after a Dec. 29 health department inspection found that Mercy had corrected its most serious problems. Part of the reason it had problems, Mercy Center said, was staff shortages, a common complaint of nursing home administrators. They said they use such methods as temporary help and overtime for permanent employees to plug staffing gaps.

In particular, nursing home administrators pointed to their inability to offer high wages to their workers as a primary reason they have difficulty attracting and retaining staff. Robert C. Aims, chief operations officer of Auburn's Mercy Center, pointed out that he can only offer between \$7 and \$8 an hour to a newly hired certified nursing aide. CNAs do much of the hard work in nursing homes, he said, including physically aiding patients.

"You can work in a retail establishment — Wal-Mart, Sears — and make probably very close to what we're able to pay," Aims said.

Abramovitz said most of the complaints her office received in 2000 were rooted in staffing shortages. For example, she said, staff who are stretched thin take longer to answer a resident's call light, or help a resident with their toileting. To help alleviate

Questions and answers

Nursing home industry observers offered the following tips for people considering a facility for themselves or a loved one.

- Ask how often staff members look in on residents, and how often staff meet with family members.

- Check out the facility's rooms for cleanliness and any unpleasant odors.

- Ask what type of activities are available to residents and how often they are scheduled.

- Spend time in the facility's dining area, talking to residents about how they like the food, and tasting it yourself.

- Observe residents to see how much they socialize with one another, and observe staff to see how they interact with residents.

- Ask the facility's staff how they deal with problems between residents or roommates.

Ample information is available on the Internet for people concerned about the rights and lives of nursing home residents. A list of organizations and pertinent questions to ask can be found at the following Web sites: the federal government's Medicare site at <http://www.medicare.gov/Nursing/Checklist.asp>; New York State's Department of Health site at <http://www.health.state.ny.us>.

staff shortages, Abramovitz said she would like to see New York do what several other states currently do — tie Medicaid funding to wage enhancement and worker training by facilities. Such a plan may help to make nursing homes more attractive places in which to work, she noted.

Nursing home administrators also said the bad press the industry gets whenever any home is cited for deficiencies by the state works against them attracting employees. Health department surveys are important, according to Mary Beth Campo, senior vice president and administrator for St. Ann's Home and the Heritage. But families looking to place a loved one in a nursing home should also rely on their own research when considering where to place someone. For example, she said, both she and Mullin-DiProsa have relatives living in St. Ann's facilities, evidence of their own faith in their own organization. She added that families researching homes should ask a simple question of nursing home staff about their residents.

"How many left the facility because they weren't happy here?"

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