

## **Elder Care Must be a Priority**

*By Rep. Frank Ryan (R-Lebanon)*

The crisis facing the elder care community has been discussed for decades in Pennsylvania with little progress made. Meaningful solutions are an immediate priority or critical shortfalls in care will occur.

Since I have been in the Legislature, I have been shocked at the unwillingness to solve problems with long term solutions even considering a major system failure at the height of the pandemic. Typically, the solutions are band-aid solutions that merely postpone the inevitable.

On April 7, 2022, I was pleased to attend an informational hearing on **House Bill 2425**, Reporting of Elder Abuse, a bill from Rep. Ann Flood (R-Northampton), of which I am a co-sponsor. I am also a member of the committee and, at age 71, a customer! The hearing was emotional, raw, yet thought provoking. The systemic issues facing the industry were discussed at length and in such a way that perhaps real solutions will surface.

While the bill concerns the reporting of elder abuse, issues surfaced about worker shortages, inadequate reimbursement rates, neglect of the elderly by their families, financial abuse, as well as emotional abuse.

From the testimony, the problems that require immediate attention include:

1. Shortage of workers and inadequate compensation in an inflationary economy.
2. Elder abuse prevention and identification
3. Dealing with abusive patients to protect staff
4. Family neglect
5. Home health care alternatives

Costs of senior programs in Pennsylvania have increased to \$11.2 billion in the 2021 budget and are expected to increase an additional \$1.5 billion per year for the foreseeable future. These increases reflect an aging population, individuals outliving their assets, increasing medical costs for residents, and inflation. Such increases are not sustainable in a Commonwealth already on unsteady footing.

The [shortage of workers](#) in the long-term care industry is such that throughout the Commonwealth there will be a shortfall of 37,000 health care workers by 2026. The work is difficult, to say the least. Caregivers are to be commended for the outstanding support most provide to our senior citizens. I know most families are so thankful that you are part of their families' lives.

Cited frequently for the employee shortfall are the reimbursement rates for Medicaid and Medicare, the below average rates of pay (due predominately to the reimbursement rates), and the difficult working conditions facing the staff combine to make it essential that a coordinated response is needed if we hope to solve the staffing shortages. Families and government at all levels need to address the escalating issues now.

The number of seniors for whom no family members survive or, sadly, even take an interest in their elder relative is mind numbing. I encourage you to visit a senior care facility and consider “adopting” someone who has lost their family. If anything, COVID-19 showed the impact of prolonged isolation on the elderly as well as children. In fact, isolation is not good for anyone.

One of the testifiers indicated that our older citizens “can certainly be opinionated” when describing the efforts of caregivers to tend to the needs of the elderly. We all chuckled a little, particularly those of us who describe ourselves as customers of “older adult” communities (meaning me of course!). The comment, however, reinforced the complexity of helping our elderly to receive the care that they deserve while protecting those working so diligently in the homes.

Home health care must also be given priority and that will be accomplished if we all get realistic about reimbursement rates for home health care agencies as well as for staff members.

Property tax elimination is also an important aspect of the problem because it permits seniors on very limited incomes the ability to age in place, which is preferable for most seniors and their families unless medical issues prevent this option. Unfortunately, when a senior loses a spouse the loss of income also frequently dislocates the surviving spouse from the home due to property taxes.

The paradox of our elder care problem is that if we do not address all of the myriad of problems for the elderly, there is likely to be a critical shortage of healthcare facilities for seniors in Pennsylvania. This failure of the industry jeopardizes seniors even more.

We have a long way to go in the post-pandemic world and I promise to keep you posted on our progress. The Aging and Older Adult Services Committee, of which I am a member, is committed to crafting meaningful solutions to these problems and to support appropriate funding issues at budget time.

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