

Now is not the time to desert our seniors

Your Turn

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Guest columnists

Rhode Island nursing homes are in the midst of an unprecedented and growing economic and labor crises.

Over the past decade, nursing homes have experienced chronic underfunding by Rhode Island Medicaid (with over \$250 million in cuts). They have barely survived the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, but its impact on the health care workforce continues to be devastating. The lack of sufficient, sustainable resources does not enable homes to effectively compete in the current labor market.

There are simply not enough workers to meet the requirements of the new staffing mandate. Rhode Island's nursing homes are at a breaking point and need relief from the onerous provisions of this mandate.

A recently released study of the "State of Skilled Nursing Facilities" by the nationally recognized CliftonLarsonAllen consulting company highlighted the operational challenges facing our country's nursing homes and provides detailed insight into the critical challenges facing nursing homes at the state level.

The insights into the financial condition of Rhode Island's nursing homes are dramatic and downright alarming.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, just since the start of the pandemic, Rhode Island's nursing home workforce has decreased by over 21%, while homecare's workforce has decreased by 3.3%, and hospitals are down just 1.6% when compared to pre-pandemic numbers. To ensure appropriate staffing levels, nursing homes have had to rely on a dramatic increase in the use of overtime, bonuses for pick-up shifts, recruitment and retention incentives, and higher wage rates. They are also utilizing temporary workers from nursing staff agencies at three and a half times pre-pandemic levels at outrageous rates.

The CLA report also illustrates the devastating impact on local nursing homes resulting from chronic Medicaid underfunding combined with a critical labor crisis and skyrocketing inflation. Today, 95% of nursing homes in Rhode Island are operating in the red, and 87% have been deemed to be at "Significant Financial Risk" and at a heightened risk of closing. Rhode Island's 87% compares to 47% of facilities in the U.S. and is up from just 19% for Rhode Island nursing homes with that designation in 2019.

Since the start of the pandemic, five nursing homes have closed as the direct result of staffing shortages and inadequate resources — displacing hundreds of Rhode Island's frailest elders, disrupting their lives and that of the staff members who cared for them, and their families. Without meaningful action, these closures are just the first of many more to come.

Lastly, the CLA study did not factor in the impact of Rhode Island's recently passed minimum-staffing mandate. This legislation could trigger up to \$68 million in fines based on a recent review by the state Department of Health if fully implemented for failing to meet standards. These excessive fines and penalties would be a death sentence for our nursing homes.

Rhode Island's nursing homes are at a crossroads. We respectfully request action now to stabilize and preserve an essential segment of our state's health care continuum. The health care workforce needs more time to stabilize, and our state government needs to implement meaningful rate increases.

We need to modify the existing staffing mandate to meet the realities of today's crises and give homes more flexibility to ensure their ability to care for residents. Over the next 20 years, Rhode Island's elder population is set to double.

Without meaningful action, more facilities will inevitably close and more elders will be displaced. We cannot let that happen.

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