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Opinion

## **Our Turn: Maureen Maigret and Bill Flynn: Time to reimagine aging and long-term care policy in R.I.**

**By Maureen Maigret and Bill Flynn**

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The COVID-19 pandemic presents a severe threat to the health of older Rhode Islanders. State data clearly show our older population has been hit hard by the virus. This is especially true for residents of nursing homes. Health department data shows 93% of the 608 COVID-19 fatalities (as of May 24) were among persons age 60 and over. Almost three-quarters of fatalities have been residents of nursing homes or assisted-living facilities.

Medicaid and Medicare are the biggest payors of nursing-home care. To ensure safe and quality care for nursing home residents, in the mid-1980s the federal government mandated major nursing home reforms. Rhode Island built on these reforms usually after disclosure of extremely poor care in a nursing home that led to revelations of serious deficiencies and harm to residents.

Historically, nursing homes were built and operated based on a traditional institutional model similar to hospitals. With few exceptions, reform efforts have not addressed the physical structure of most nursing homes. Residents typically live in semi-private rooms and may share a bathroom with one or more persons. These are not optimum conditions for preventing the spread of infections. Some facilities have changed their cultures to allow for more private rooms and bathrooms and greater resident choice. However, such efforts are often hampered by limitations of public financing and regulation.

Comparative reports show most nursing homes in Rhode Island generally provide quality care (America's health rankings 2019, U.S. News & World Report 2019). However, nursing staff hours per resident, a key quality indicator, does vary greatly (Kaiser Health News, May 2019). We know caring for residents during this crisis is challenging and value highly the work of our care workers.

COVID-19 cases and fatalities vary significantly among nursing homes, and studies should try to identify why some nursing homes have had a high prevalence while others have not. Such information could serve to inform future policy.

In the meantime, what we do know is that nursing home residents appear to have been at greater risk during this pandemic than older adults living in the community, which should give us pause.

For many years Rhode Island advocacy groups such as the Senior Agenda Coalition have urged our state to invest in a wider range of home and community care options that would allow more seniors to delay or avoid completely the need for nursing home care.

Compared to many other states, Rhode Island lags behind in funding opportunities for persons to remain living at home and in the community, where most say they would like to receive needed care (AARP Scorecard, 2017.) Advocates pushed the 2009 general assembly to pass legislation to set a goal to spend half of Medicaid-funded long-term care dollars on home and community-based care. Yet progress has been slow. An April 2020 report issued by the state Executive Office of Health and Human Services showed little change in the proportion of total spending on home and community care services versus nursing home care since 2015.

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on nursing home residents demands that we take a thorough look at how we care for vulnerable older adults. We need to ask some tough questions: Can we provide incentives to allow our nursing homes to convert to more private rooms and baths that would surely help with infection control and offer residents a better quality of life? Will we spend the money to pay a living wage to all direct-care workers whether working in homes or residential facilities? Will we raise the income limit for a program to assist more persons in paying for home care and adult day services?

These are just a sample of ideas which advocates have promoted. It's time for state leaders, advocates, consumers and providers to join together to reimagine aging and long-term policy in Rhode Island. Our seniors and adults living with disabilities deserve better.

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