

By James Walker

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Haven? Nursing homes have been a horror show

If 2020 has done nothing else, it has reinforced my fear of being old and stuck in a nursing home.

I will tell readers upfront this column will not sit well with the nursing home industry or those who run them but I could care less.

And before any champions of this industry sit down to bombard me with emails, I'm telling them not to waste their time.

I am not interested in explanations or reasoning as to why thousands of senior citizens under their care died and spent their final hours in emotional turmoil.

I will never accept any explanation that COVID-19 caught the industry off-guard like everyone else.

Because it is not supposed to.

Medical professionals at every level are trained to know the basics and any fool knows that a deadly, airborne virus will affect the most vulnerable.

And they don't come any more vulnerable or susceptible to illness than fragile senior citizens.

The horror show that nursing homes have been for seniors this year is inexcusable.

Thousands upon thousands of deaths and the latest outbreaks in nursing homes here in Connecticut tell me they still can't get it right.

According to CTLatinoNews, 8,847 nursing home residents here have been infected with the virus, and 2,877 have died.

And nationwide, seniors in nursing homes accounted for 40 percent of COVID-19 deaths — here in Connecticut, it's at 70 percent.

I can't imagine the fear that seniors stuck in nursing homes must have felt as the virus invaded their space and spread death around them.

I can't imagine the isolation and loneliness they must have felt — and are still feeling — when the people they love and trust the most are kept from them.

And I can't imagine how helpless they felt and still must be feeling because they are powerless to do anything about it.

So, yes, everything that has happened in 2020 tells me to do one thing when it comes to nursing homes: run.

And run before old age and a cane makes it impossible.

And that brings me to the purpose of this column.

I may have found a way to run.

I was talking to Kathy Callahan, with Alliances By Alisa Media Relations, about an upcoming episode of my podcast "Real talk, Real people," when the conversation turned to nursing homes.

She told me about a program I knew about but didn't have a lot of information on.

But it could be the answer for me and thousands of others.

The Connecticut Adult Family Living program allows a senior to stay at home or move into the home of a family member or friend and the program pays families to take care of seniors in their own space.

Callahan put me in touch with Ron Craft and his mother, Shirley Dunphy.

The Bristol mother and son are getting help from Assisted Living Services Inc. in Cheshire, a provider of the AFL program.

I will be talking with Craft and the chief operating officer of ALS next week on my podcast because I think more people should know about this program.

“It was difficult at first for me to admit that I physically needed help as I was always very independent and took care of others,” Dunphy said in a release. “I had to learn how to allow others to care for me. There’s always a sense of pride in all of us not wanting to admit you need help. But it is so natural for a mother and son to care for and help each other.”

I know some people have no choice and I know that all nursing homes don’t fall short. And I wish I could applaud those that don’t and send them kudos for the care they deliver.

But as I wrote in my column “Safe? Where is the Haven for seniors?” I cannot turn my attention away from the hundreds of deaths, findings of abuse and also the mishaps with medications over the last 10 years.

And I cannot ignore that this industry refuses to raise the wages of the people they expect to put in long hours caring for the elderly.

The AFL may not be the answer for everyone but, in my opinion, it is a powerful alternative because seniors no longer have to feel they are a burden to family members if they have to depend on them.

I know it is easy for me to play Monday morning quarterback, but I can't stop thinking how so many seniors suffered.

I keep thinking, these are the people — like me and everyone else in the workforce — whose intelligence, sweat and muscle had a hand in keeping this country safe and prosperous.

To get to the end and be a second thought when a crisis hits is sobering.

That is why I wrote at the beginning, don't bother writing me with the excuses because I don't want to hear it.

I inherited my fear of nursing homes from my mother, whose greatest fear was that she would end up in one.

I now know why.

Like many people, I have worked within the constraints of a paycheck that made it financially impossible to save and prepare for the future. And as you grow older, you do wonder where you will spend your final days.

I think I may have found a way to stay home.

Haven? The safest place is home.