

LNP

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In our words

Nursing homes in crisis

THE ISSUE

The LNP | LancasterOnline Editorial Board held an online discussion Tuesday with Adam Marles, president and CEO of LeadingAge PA, a statewide association representing nonprofit providers of senior housing, health care and community services; John Sauder, president and CEO of the nonprofit Mennonite Home Communities; and Larry Zook, president and CEO of the nonprofit Landis Homes.

Nursing homes and other senior living facilities were battered by COVID-19, as residents died in numbers that left other residents, families and staff members reeling.

So, before we go a sentence further, we'd like to thank the hardworking staff members of Lancaster County's nursing homes. Your heroism in the face of this lethal — and draining — pandemic did not go unnoticed by us.

And to the residents of those facilities: We've never lost sight of your importance to our community and we continue to be grateful for your countless contributions to Lancaster County.

But these folks need more than our admiration. Nursing homes, it's clear, need more federal and state support if they're to provide the high-quality services we'd demand for our own parents and for ourselves and if they're to pay their staffs in a way that's commensurate with the important work they do.

State Medicaid reimbursement rates have been flat for the past seven years. And Marles, Sauder and Zook expressed concern that Gov. Tom Wolf's proposed 2021-22 budget spells more bad news.

They didn't seem interested in scoring political points off the subpar response of the Wolf administration to COVID-19 in the commonwealth's longterm care facilities.

Marles, of LeadingAge PA, said that an early state policy requiring nursing homes to accept patients who had tested positive for COVID-19 was not enforced, but did seem to empower hospitals — essential referral sources for nursing homes — to insist that they take admissions.

Sauder said the policy had little impact on Mennonite Home Communities.

Of far greater impact, all three said, was a state response that failed — and still is failing — to prioritize nursing homes and senior citizens, whether regarding

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personal protective equipment, COVID-19 testing or vaccination.

They decried what they believe to be the chronic underfunding of senior living facilities by the state. “COVID only exacerbated a funding gap that existed before COVID,” Sauder said.

And they emphasized the need to learn from mistakes that were made so we’re better prepared for future health crises. Zook, of Landis Homes, said elected officials at all levels and from both political parties had not prepared adequately for the pandemic. “Anything that we can do to prepare for the future will be just so helpful,” he said.

They made other points that we believe deserve to be amplified.

— In December, LeadingAge PA joined with the Pennsylvania Health Care Association and the Pennsylvania Coalition of Affiliated Healthcare & Living Communities in filing a lawsuit demanding that Wolf administration officials distribute to nursing homes more than \$150 million in federal dollars that they say must be directed to those facilities under Pennsylvania law.

Marles asked Tuesday that the state provide evidence that the money has gone, as state officials claim, to support nursing home residents.

The state Department of Human Services has insisted in statements that the lawsuit is some sort of money grab for nursing homes “that have already received more than \$800 million in taxpayer stimulus. The assertions made in the materials the associations distributed to the media are simply false.”

If this is true, the state ought to prove it and produce a full accounting of where the money has gone. We’d certainly like to see it. And nursing home operators deserve to see it.

— Even today, the masks that nursing home staff members wear cost three times more than they did before the pandemic. COVID-19 tests cost \$50 each and require from nursing home staffs, as Sauder noted, “a ton of energy and a ton of time.”

Mennonite Home Communities, which he leads, finally has been able to reduce testing to just once a week. But nursing homes will need to continue this costly procedure weekly until Lancaster County reaches a positivity rate that’s less than 5% — and stays there for two weeks, Sauder said. (It’s now at 5.7%.)

So the precautions we all take — or fail to take — to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have a real impact on nursing homes. As Zook pointed out, “As the virus spreads in the community, there’s really no way to build a moat around a senior living setting.”

— These expenses are crushing to a system of care that’s already struggling to cover costs and to pay their undercompensated staff, some of whom have been so taxed by the pandemic that they’re leaving nursing home care.

Both Sauder and Zook said they believe it’s important to staff their facilities fully to provide high-quality care. Marles said that as this has become harder, nursing homes across the commonwealth have reduced their available beds or closed altogether — and those “are the places where you want your parents and grandparents to receive care.”

For a state that ranks in the top 10 among states for its senior population, this is not a positive development.

Hence the call for Pennsylvania to increase its medical assistance reimbursement rate.

Medicaid doesn’t come close to covering the actual daily costs of providing a patient’s care, especially for high-quality providers. And the gap cannot be made up merely by raising rates for private-pay residents. As Sauder sees it, this is “unsustainable.”

Costs used to be offset at least partly by Medicare payments for patients rehabbing, for instance, from surgery or injury. But the length of such stays has been shortened by health care advancements and managed care, Marles said.

Budgets have been further tightened by pandemic-related costs, including “hero pay” and mental health support resources for staff members, Sauder said.

Said Marles, in a message we hope is heard in Harrisburg: “What we need is the state to step up and say older adults who are vulnerable to COVID-19, and generally have significant care needs, need to be cared for at a level that is adequately funded. ... We need the state to step up and say, ‘Older adults are a priority.’”

— This applies, too, he said, to providing COVID-19 vaccines to people newly admitted to nursing homes and newly hired staff members, as well as to those who initially declined vaccination but now have agreed to be vaccinated. Marles said he hasn’t seen such a plan from the state and “it needs to be addressed.”

We agree.

Courtesy of LNP|LancasterOnline