

LEGAL EASE



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State Needs to Act on Long Term Living Bill

Most people who become ill would rather stay at home in the comfort of familiar surroundings. Family and friends may be willing to help, but are often constrained by their own family and work obligations from being able to provide full time care. Home and Community based care should be able to meet the needs of most people who wish to stay at home. However, in Pennsylvania, the focus, and much of the public funds are spent on maintaining people outside their homes, in long term care institutions.

A recent comment on this matter by Linda Rhodes in her blog, "Our parents, ourselves" (<http://blog.pennlive.com/life>), highlights the opportunity Pennsylvania currently has to change this focus on institutional care. The new Health Care Reform law could yield Pennsylvania an additional \$500 million in federal funds to assist people with long-term care needs to remain at home. However, the Pennsylvania legislature must act, or this opportunity, and the attendant funds, will be lost.

Currently, our system to access Home and Community based care is fractured. Although nursing homes may be the best choice for some people, either long term or short term, it is not the best choice for everyone. There is no denying that nursing homes are very expensive and cost the State a great deal of money, especially for the residents who do not need or want to be there. Staying home is often the preferred option, but the system can be difficult, if not impossible to access.

Achieving eligibility for Medicaid for nursing home care is complicated but basically deals with one agency, the Pennsylvania Department of Welfare. On the other hand, access to managing care at home is through various departments, such as the Office of Aging, Public Welfare, and Human Services. It is even more complicated if an adult has been receiving personal care services for most of his or her adult life, and then becomes 60 years old. It is necessary to enter an entirely new aging network with new forms, new rules and new people.

In order to qualify for the federal Health Care Reform monies, Pennsylvania must offer consumers a single point of entry for long-term care services whether they are offered in the home, community, or nursing home. Consumers must be offered just one assessment form, and receive a uniform plan of care. This is clearly not how the system works now.

However, all is not lost. The current administration has created the Office of Long Term Living. This has laid the groundwork for the single door approach to access services consumers need to stay at home. Furthermore, Pennsylvania legislature has introduced a bill (HB1152) which will bring the Office of Long Term Living and the Department of Aging under one roof. This can show the federal government that the State can streamline its own bureaucracy.

Now is the time to encourage your State legislators to vote for HB 1152 or the "Department of Aging and Long Term Living" bill. If legislators take too long to act, a new administration will be in place, and the time it takes for everything to be put in place again may result in no action, and lost opportunities for federal money. Call your legislators to have them vote for HB 1152, for everyone in Pennsylvania who needs, or will need, Home and Community based services.