

Another Voice/Elder care

Another Voice: Underfunded nursing homes are doing what they can to help staff

Michael S. King

Oct 7, 2024

At our senior living campus in Rochester, we recently opened an employee grocery store. Close to 50% of our employees are now eligible to receive free groceries twice a month at our new store.

You may wonder why we did this. For a while, we have recognized the need to help our staff with the struggles they face due to the rising cost of groceries. Many of our staff members are single parents, sometimes supporting households of three or more. They are trying to figure out how to pay rent or mortgages, car payments, day care and more. Long-term care workers struggle to meet their financial needs with current wages.

Unfortunately, New York continues to underfund nursing home Medicaid rates. This is evident through the state's lack of adequate funding for our staff. Nursing homes are still being paid rates based on 2007 costs even though inflation has gone up over 45% since then. Here at our campus, we were fortunate to be able to put together an employee grocery store to alleviate some of the financial stresses on our staff. But it is not enough.

Long-term care facilities are competing with organizations like Amazon, manufacturing and retail that can afford to pay higher wages because costs are passed on to customers. In contrast, long-term care facilities cannot unilaterally increase Medicaid rates — we rely on state government to provide a Medicaid reimbursement system that covers costs of daily care for older adults and allows us to pay a living wage to staff.

More than 33 nursing homes have closed since 2014 in our state with over 1,600 nursing home beds permanently closing. This means that, at some point, you may be faced with a loved one traveling several hours away to a nursing home — your parents or grandparents could be denied admission to the long-term care facility they prefer or forced to move far away.

Hospitals are in gridlock because they cannot discharge patients who need long-term care or short-term rehabilitation, due to lack of bed availability in nursing homes. These patients are taking up hospital beds from new patients who need them. Across New York, people are spending four hours or more waiting in emergency room — the sixth-longest wait time in the country. You or someone you know may be unable to get care at their hospital of choice.

If New York would fund nursing homes on current costs, it would translate into higher wages for nursing home staff. Gov. Kathy Hochul must make long-term care a priority in her next budget.

Michael S. King is president and CEO of Jewish Home in Rochester.