



Labor

Nursing Home Staffing, Transparency Up For Debate



by **Christine Stuart** and **Hugh McQuaid**

February 16, 2023, 12:00 pm



Lurlette Newell a certified nurses' assistant at Westside Care Center in Manchester Credit: Hugh McQuaid / CTNewsJunkie

Nursing home staffing shortages, financial transparency, air conditioning, and family visits topped the agenda Thursday for the Human Services and Aging Committees.

One of the more controversial proposals would require a minimum number of hours of care per resident moving it from three hours to 4.1 hours per day, the recommended level of care from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services since 2001.

While everyone who has a loved one in a nursing home wants the best care for them, staffing shortages have meant that nursing staff has less time for each patient every day.

The bill would impose a \$10,000 fine on nursing homes that didn't provide this level of care.

Support

Oppose

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Supporters of the bills held a press conference in the Legislative Office Building prior to Thursday's hearing. During the event, Lurette Newell, a certified nurses' assistant at Westside Care Center in Manchester, said nursing home staff are frequently overwhelmed as patients once cared for at hospitals are being shifted to nursing home settings.

"Residents need our love and affection and we are not able to give this to them due to the lack of time with the current staffing levels," Newell said. "Connecticut residents living in a nursing home should be a priority to the legislators of Connecticut."

In testimony before the legislative panel, Ed Hawthorne, president of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, agreed.

"Safe staffing levels are important for protecting the quality of patient care and workplace safety. They also reduce staff burnout and turnover in an industry that is desperate to hold on to qualified and competent staff," Hawthorne said.

Timothy Flaherty, an administrator of Village Crest, said recruiting staff, even before the pandemic, to achieve that 4.1 hours was difficult.

“Hiking up minimum staffing level without any financial support will only further negatively impact our facility,” he said. “We don’t have the labor in the community to support this bill.”

Russell Schwartz, vice president and director of operations at Avon Health Center and West Hartford Health & Rehabilitation Center, said they set up interviews every week and many applicants don’t even show up.

“The workforce just does not seem to be there,” Schwartz said. “Everyone is chasing the highest hourly rate, with no commitment to the job, or the residents. There are only so many extra shifts our staff can cover before suffering burnout.”

Family members like John Interlandi, who is the conservator of his brother, said when he visited his brother he found his pants and his bed soiled in urine and the temperature in his room was over 80 degrees.

“Based on my personal experiences, I am very concerned about the care that folks like Joe receive within the nursing home setting,” Interlandi said.

Cinnamon St. John, a senior health policy specialist at the Center for Medicare Advocacy, said proper staffing is at the heart and soul of every nursing facility.

In Connecticut’s 233 nursing homes, over 4,100 residents have suffered COVID related deaths, and there have been over 28,000 COVID cases.

“Perhaps one of the most important lessons to come out of the COVID-19 crisis is the realization that nursing home facilities must have the right numbers and mix of nursing and direct care workers on hand,” St. John said.

St. John added that “Appropriate staffing matters and is proven to save lives.”

A study in 2020 found that among facilities with one confirmed positive case of COVID, every additional 20-minute increase in nursing staff per resident, per day was associated with a 22% reduction in confirmed COVID cases, and a 26% reduction in COVID deaths.

Aside from staffing, lawmakers heard from the public about the importance of family visitation and air conditioning in nursing facilities.

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