

Charting a Course to Rebalance Long-Term Care in RI

By Kevin McKay and James P. Nyberg

The Rhode Island Global Consumer Choice Compact, or Global Medicaid Waiver, has been approved by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) in an effort to rebalance the long-term care system for the state by creating greater access to home and community-based services, thereby giving seniors the right care in the right setting at the right time. The underlying goal is both laudable and timely given the state's current fiscal crisis and demographics. Yet, as the state moves to create a more streamlined, cost-effective system, there are legitimate concerns that need to be addressed about eligibility, infrastructure, and the state's ability to implement the proposed changes, given existing limitations and staff.

Under the global waiver, for example, a new Medicaid assessment and eligibility process is proposed. The current approval process is already slow, made worse by a recent wave of state worker retirements. If the new system adds bureaucracy or confusion, delays *will* negatively affect individuals and providers. Expedient assessments and appropriate placements are critical to good care. A clear and transparent process with a sufficient and well-trained staff that provides accurate and timely information is, therefore, paramount to achieving success.

In addition, restructuring of the existing system to ensure that quality care is available throughout the spectrum is necessary.

- The waiver anticipates some nursing home contraction and a change to the complexion of residents served. With people staying in the community longer, nursing home residents of the future will be fewer in number and have more medical challenges than the residents of today. Staffing and reimbursement rates need to adapt to maintain a strong nursing home industry.
- Implementation of the waiver assumes that the demand for assisted living will increase, however, currently only a limited number of residences provide such housing under Medicaid. Reimbursement systems need to be revamped to spur growth.
- As we strive to keep more seniors living independently, we need to eliminate subsidized housing waiting lists and develop a strategy that includes shared living, housing conversions, and new construction – living arrangements that will need to be supported by community services such as reliable transportation and home delivery of nutritious meals.
- Adult day centers provide a wide range of medical and social services to individuals living in the community, and care for increasingly sick and frail individuals. Their role must grow under the revamped system, and reimbursement, referral, and transportation issues need to be addressed.

The rebalancing initiative also needs to be consistent, whether it is Medicaid-funded services under the Global Waiver or non-Medicaid services. Transportation is a critical need, for example. Yet cutbacks to the RIde bus system are being proposed that would

reduce its service to three days a week for adult day. Isn't that counterintuitive when we're trying to keep more seniors out of nursing homes by placing them in community-based adult day centers? How will family members with inflexible work situations cope with the changes? Another example is the current practice of paying for nursing home beds that are unused, known as "beds out of service." Why should we be paying to maintain existing nursing beds when the overall number of nursing home residents will decline?

We support the current administration and the state legislature for their overall commitment to rebalance the long-term care system. However, thorough review and input by policymakers, stakeholders, and consumers alike must take place to effectively implement this Global Medicaid Waiver so that staffing and infrastructure needs created by the change can be anticipated. The creation of implementation teams will help ensure that the new system will provide timely assessments and eligibility determinations, a fair appeals process and a reimbursement system based on acuity of care, while supporting services that help the elderly as they strive to remain in the community.

Independence and choice. They're two powerful goals that we can all agree on wanting to obtain for our elderly parents, neighbors, friends, and (eventually) for ourselves. Rhode Island is facing an extreme fiscal crisis that has provided the stimulus for this Global Medicaid Waiver. Working together, we can create a new infrastructure that will be a model for this country – a system that is adequately prepared to meet the needs of our elders as they age in a state that will be noted for the dignity it affords its senior citizens.

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