

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 11, 2010

AVERTING A FORSEEABLE HUMAN TRAGEDY
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In 1994 Germaine Morsilli and the Hillside Health Center were names on the lips of most Rhode Islanders. After a compelling expose, the nursing home was revealed to have delivered substandard care that resulted in stage four bed sores for 88-year-old Mrs. Morsilli. Soon after being transferred out of Hillside, Mrs. Morsilli died. Immediately following, lawmakers invoked her name while trying to pass new regulations for the nursing home industry while vowing to never forget her memory.

Six long, budget-crunching years have passed and Rhode Islanders' collective memory has, unfortunately, faded

Just last month, a study commissioned by the Department of Human Services, called "Acuity Adjusted Rates for Rhode Island Nursing Facilities" recommended adopting lower reimbursement rates for many nursing homes at a time when only 10 percent of our nursing homes meet or exceed federally recommended minimum staffing levels, according to the Department of Health's own data. In just a few short weeks, the recommendations are slated to become law on February 1.

As advocates for the elderly, we are sounding the whistle. Adoption of the DHS proposal is closing in on us. We need to stop this train in its tracks to avert a looming human tragedy.

While we commend the goal of DHS to better match nursing home payments to the needs of residents, and are also cognizant of the budget pressures Rhode Island faces, the methodology for this study is off base and needs to be scrapped. When labor costs are cut, the inevitable *will* happen. When you combine exhausted employees with staff shortages and elderly people in need of care, study after study proves that it sets the stage for abuse and neglect. With state inspectors tapped because of budget cuts, lives could literally be at stake

Both of our organizations have supported efforts to keep seniors at home to contain state costs for care, but we also recognize that there still exists a population of frail adults who truly need nursing homes. Skilled care is labor intensive and, therefore, costly. An acuity adjustor to reflect the increased care these individuals require makes sense, but the DHS proposal doesn't include that. The proposed rates will be based on one statewide average price for nursing assistance, ignoring the differences between nursing homes and the care they provide -- a system that runs contrary to best practices used in virtually every other state.

What's being presented to the industry actually amounts to a *cut* to many nursing homes. We assert that quality of care needs to be considered when calculating minimum staffing levels and corresponding reimbursement rates. Nursing homes that provide higher nurse-to-resident ratios should receive better compensation.

Belt-tightening measures are appropriate in difficult economic times and we will continue to offer to work with DHS to find cost-saving solutions for the Medicaid program. Indeed, the dedication and interest of DHS's leadership around this issue is appreciated. However, the acuity adjustment that may soon become law was crafted by an out-of-state consultant whose conclusions and proposal are simply off-base.

As an industry, we understand that sacrifices must be made across the board, and we're willing to do our share to help address the state's economic burden. We just cannot support, in good conscience, the proposal being made because of the unintended consequences that it will have upon the frail elders we represent. We have presented alternatives to the proposed acuity adjustment, including a one-time fee to help defray the budget deficit which would generate an equivalent amount of savings as the proposed acuity adjustment. Going forward, we are committed to working with DHS, as well as the General Assembly, towards a more logical and sustainable Medicaid reimbursement system that factors in client care needs and quality of care.

Let's not forget Germaine Morsilli. Let's keep our promise to keep nursing homes safe for our frail elders by ensuring that nursing homes are adequately staffed. Please call your state legislator and tell them that you are in favor of repealing the proposed acuity adjustment plan for nursing homes.

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