

# KENTUCKIANS FOR NURSING HOME REFORM

"A non-profit organization dedicated to the welfare of the "Forgotten Kentuckians"

Our web site is: <http://www.KyNursingHomeReform.org>

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**IN CASE YOU DIDN'T READ IT.....** below please find our op-ed page piece in this morning's *Courier-Journal*. For those of you who do not get the Louisville newspaper, we pass it along to you here. We are grateful to *The Courier-Journal* for the continuing coverage of nursing home issues by the news department and their editorial support. And we are especially appreciative today to Opinion Page Editor Keith Runyon for running the piece we now share with you.....

Thursday, February 14, 2008

## Improving nursing home staffs

**By Bernie Vonderheide**  
Special to The Courier-Journal

Once again the nursing home industry has come up with a far-fetched excuse for not putting enough front-line nurses and nurse's aides in their facilities.

And once again the problems caused by short-staffing were revealed. This time in an excellent *Courier-Journal* front-page article by reporter Deborah Yetter (Jan. 24).

The excuse this time, proclaimed by the head of a big nursing home lobbying group in Kentucky, is that appropriate staffing levels should be based on professional judgment — the judgment of nursing home owners and no one else, and especially not a new regulation. That's a scary thought to advocates for nursing home reform because right now more than 90 percent of the nursing homes in the U.S. have insufficient staff, according to a government survey. The so-called professionals are not getting the job done. And the guess is that the "professional judgment" of nursing home owners is affected by making money — profit over people in their facilities.

As House Bill 109, which has been introduced in the current legislative session, makes its way, you are going to hear all kinds of excuses. The nursing home industry is good at it. It would rather confuse nursing home residents, the public and lawmakers with excuses instead of working to improve some of the horrible situations you find in the facilities because of short staff.

HB 109, introduced by Rep. Carl Rollins II, D-Midway, actually leaves the "professionals" plenty of chance to use their judgment in the right way. That is because the bill does not tell nursing home owners how to staff their facilities at all. Rather, it mandates a level of care — a safety net, if you will — that keeps residents from harm.

Then the bill leaves it to the facility operators to adjust the staffing upward when needed.

There'll be other excuses by the nursing homes for doing nothing. One of these is money, or lack of it, say the nursing home owners who drive around in big, shiny cars. The money excuse doesn't hold water either.

Here's why:

A provider tax increase in the 2004 General Assembly has resulted in a 24 percent increase in state and federal matching Medicaid reimbursement funds. In four years, the tax that nursing homes pay, and then get back in a 4-to-1 ratio in Medicaid reimbursements, has increased more than \$151 million. Nursing homes in Kentucky got \$745 million in the 2007 state fiscal year to take care of their Medicaid patients. And this is significant because about 70 percent of nursing home residents are on Medicaid.

Moreover, the big hike in the provider tax also put nursing home funding at 100 percent of a formula the nursing homes themselves had designed. And in doing so, they promised legislators that with full funding they would provide quality care. Of course, they haven't.

The formula even contains a suggested ratio of front-line caregivers that coincidentally closely matches those called for in HB 109. The formula ratio, however, is not mandatory. Thus the staffing problems.

So it's time to put excuses aside. It's time for the nursing homes to come to the table with reform advocates and lawmakers and together work out a way to keep nursing home residents safe.

"The General Assembly should look carefully into any serious argument that the group (nursing homes) make," a *Courier-Journal* editorial (Jan. 25) said. Then, as the editorial adds, "The General Assembly should step off in the right direction."

Advocates agree. The time is now to make all of our nursing homes in Kentucky safe and pleasant places to live and grow old.

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