

Consumer Group Criticizes Thompson Letter Dismissing Report on Dangerous Staffing Levels in Nursing Homes

The National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform today strongly criticized the Bush Administration for dismissing – with a two-page letter – three volumes of the most extensive research ever conducted on nurse staffing needs in nursing homes.

“It took some of the best researchers in the country four years to develop quantifiable evidence that most nursing homes staff at dangerously low thresholds,” said NCCNHR executive director Donna R. Lenhoff. “They compiled two reports of three volumes each thoroughly documenting the number of hours of care residents must receive from nurses and nursing assistants to avoid painful, even dangerous, conditions such as bedsores and infections.

“Yet it took the Department of Health and Human Services and Secretary Tommy Thompson only four months to dismiss the report as ‘insufficient,’” she said.

Thompson transmitted the Department's long-awaited nursing home staffing report to Congress this week, some 12 years after Congress authorized it and four years after the research began in earnest during the Clinton Administration.

Thompson's letter said he has “serious reservations” about the feasibility of establishing federal staffing ratios to improve quality because of the “variety of quality measures used” in the research and “the perpetual shifting of such measures.”

“This statement is ironic,” said Lenhoff, “since his letter also touts his department's Nursing Home Quality Initiative to provide consumers with ‘Quality Indicators’ taken from the same standardized resident assessment data researchers used in the staffing report.

“It is unfortunate that Secretary Thompson is ignoring an overwhelming body of evidence that there is a relationship between nurse staffing levels and quality,” Lenhoff continued. “And that while good management practices, training and other factors can improve care, there is *no* substitute for having enough qualified workers available.”

The report, the second phase of a study called *Appropriateness of Minimum Nurse Staffing Standards in Nursing Homes*, says residents must receive at least 4.1 hours of combined nurse and nursing assistant care per day. Nursing assistants need between 2.8 and 3.2 hours a day to complete routine personal care.

The ratios are comparable to standards adopted by NCCNHR's membership in 1998 and widely accepted by health care professionals and policymakers as necessary staffing levels. Lenhoff said NCCNHR will continue to urge Congress and state legislatures to enact minimum staffing standards.

NCCNHR has provided consumer information, technical assistance, and a voice in Washington for nursing home residents, citizen advocacy groups, and long-term care ombudsmen for more than 25 years.