

ABANDONING AMERICANS WHEN THEY ARE AT THEIR WEAKEST-NOT THE AMERICA I KNOW

We like to think of America as a humane country- one that has policies in place that speak of care and concern for its citizens. And mostly that is true- except when we are talking about America's seniors. Those that are old, ill or have multiple chronic conditions spend their final years in institutions. There is a tsunami coming at the rate of 10,000 baby boomers a day that turn 65 and this will happen for the next 20 years. According to a recent study, over 90% of surveyed seniors want to stay in their homes as long as possible.

Progress has been substantial over the past 30 years, with 3,000 home care agencies becoming 33,000 today and hospice programs growing from 59 to 5,000. There are currently more than two million working in the home care industry with more than 12 million people receiving medical and non-medical home care services annually.

November is National Home Care & Hospice Month, which highlights the benefits of being cared for at home. Today, millions of America's seniors and disabled citizens depend on home care services to remain healthy, stable, and out of costly traditional settings. For decades, caring for the elderly, disabled and chronically ill at home has provided a dignified and high-efficient method of treatment. Home-based care is also clinically effective, utilizing advanced technologies and helping to cost-effectively manage chronic diseases that account for 75 percent of our nation's health care spending.

Despite the proven cost effectiveness of home health care- Medicare has continue to cut to the bone home health reimbursements, to the tune of \$12 billion over the next few years, which will lead to negative Medicare financial margins for more than half (52.3 percent) of all home health care agencies in the U.S.

The average annual home care expenditure for Medicare is \$22,000. Compare that with the annual Medicare nursing home expenditure of \$80,000. Home care is the least expensive care that Medicare reimburses, yet inexplicably the Administration, has targeted home care as a means to deficit reduction. The recent recommendation of instituting a \$100 co-pay per health episode on home care services, is a sick tax that falls heavily on the backs of chronically ill Americans. Co-pays have been proven on multiple occasions (as recently as 2003, and going back to 1972) to be disastrous for the quality of care and in fact ineffective in delivering cost reductions.

The simple fact is that the U.S. has failed to create a national policy with respect to the treatment of its oldest and weakest members. America must live up to its values and make reality congruent with intent. There is no question that health care is a basic civil right. This truly is the last great civil rights battle. All citizens, including those who are old and ill, have the same right to enjoy the freedoms that are rooted in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Americans, who all too often take these rights for granted, should remember that freedoms which are abridged for one group diminish the freedom enjoyed by all.