

Op Ed -- 3/31/11

## **It's easy to balance the budget on the backs of the elderly**

By Frank Tripodi  
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As the economy, the Middle East and Japan have dominated the news in the past few months, the New York State legislature has been quietly working on a \$1 billion reduction plan that will cripple home-care and close nursing homes throughout the state.

In their efforts to cut the budget, lawmakers are taking the easy route - going after the low-hanging fruit – our elderly, with a disproportionate percentage of reductions.

Medicare and Medicaid are always hot buttons that lawmakers push first when the going gets tough. It's easy to cut the budget on the backs of the sick, frail and elderly because they can't fight back. Unlike the vocal teachers' unions, who is the voice of the elderly? Why is it not acceptable to cut budgets for education, but it's OK when they pertain to the elderly?

Anyone with a loved one in a nursing home or someone being cared for at home by a home-health-care aide should be very concerned about this reform for several reasons. Actually, all of us should be alarmed because this bill will affect the course of elder care for years to come. At some point in our lives, we'll all be a care-giver for a loved one, or face options for ourselves in elder care. Under this bill, they'll be no options.

If the bill goes through, 30 to 60 nursing homes will be closed. In addition, the home-health-care industry will be, in essence, put out of business. Our representatives in Albany are proposing a 2 percent cut in the reimbursement rate for nursing homes, which already can't make ends meet because of the high cost of care. We are only reimbursed for a portion of what it costs us to care for a resident in one of our nursing homes. In addition, lawmakers propose a living wage bill that will make the cost of hiring an aide for at-home care unaffordable.

Where will the elderly folks who are displaced from closed nursing homes go? What will happen to people living independently at home with aide help? I don't want to be forced into a nursing home, and probably most of you don't either, but if my option for home-health-care is eliminated, I won't have a choice. Neither will you.

Don't be fooled to think it's all political rhetoric and a budget-balancing game. While the bill is very complicated, in a nutshell, here is why New Yorkers should care about this, whether you're 35 or 95.

While we all know that cuts have to be made in New York's budget, several aspects about the process have me particularly concerned. First and foremost, is the speed by which the lawmakers are trying to push this bill. The cuts are disproportionate to elder care. Lawmakers should slow down and think about the ramifications.

There is also the lack of input from senior care experts who know the business. Gov. Cuomo's Medicaid Redesign Task Force doesn't include any representatives from the skilled nursing care and home-care industries. Several very reputable organizations, including the Home Care Association and the New York State Association of Homes and Services for the Aged, were willing to serve, but weren't asked.

We all need to consider what will happen to loved ones and friends who are now in nursing homes that will potentially be closed under the Governor's plan. Where will they go? There's a shortage of skilled nursing beds now. What happens when 30 to 60 homes close?

Last but not least, and perhaps the biggest crime in this whole process, is what will happen when home-health-care agencies can't afford to stay in business. Who will be left to take care of elderly folks who want to live independently at home? They won't be able to seek out a nursing home bed because the homes are closed.

I know that answers aren't easy, but I would ask that lawmakers do not balance the budget on the backs of our senior citizens. At the very least, work with us. Ask us to sit on your Task Force. Find out how we can work together to make sure our elderly are cared for in the manner that we'd each like to be cared for some day.

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