



We cannot reform health care at the expense of our seniors

Medicare cuts will hurt nursing home residents' quality care and cost thousands of caregiver jobs

By J. Emmett Reed, CAE

If Washington politicians thought the August recess was going to be a holiday vacation, or a time to small talk with constituents, they're in for a rude awakening. They'll get an earful from Floridians who have lost their jobs, had their homes foreclosed and their security threatened. Now Washington is asking us to take a chance on sweeping health care reform.

While the details of health care reform are debated, what is beyond dispute is that something must be done to trim the costs of a system that consumes 16 percent of our national economic output.

Achieving meaningful health care we can all be proud of and which will improve the health of every Florida resident is a necessity, not an option.

Protecting vulnerable seniors is also a critical priority from which we must never deviate. Yet, they will suffer the most if cuts in Medicare are allowed to accelerate. On July 31, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services imposed new regulation which cuts Medicare payments for nursing homes by as much as \$16 billion over 10 years. This regulation casts a new light on the additional \$45 billion in nursing home cuts that Congress is proposing to pay for health care reform.

In the year 2010 alone, Medicare cuts in Florida will amount to nearly \$80 million...the second highest level in the nation. Bottom line, it's projected that this will cost our state \$132 million in business activity, \$66 million in labor income, and 1,960 lost jobs.

These cuts will significantly endanger Florida nursing home residents' care, while jeopardizing the state's already fragile economy and caregiver job base.

As the Executive Director of the Florida Health Care Association, I am alarmed that our nurses and caregivers will no longer be able to perform their vital services if the burden of cost savings is unfairly placed on their service.

Today, Florida nursing homes are seeing an increasingly diverse patient base, providing a greater variety of acute care, rehabilitative and convalescent services that cannot be delivered elsewhere. We must not reform health care by cutting out the people who provide it, and those whose very lives depend on it.

These cuts will sidetrack our ability to create good-paying health care jobs and undermine Medicare policies already in place, policies which have made Medicare more efficient for patients and more accountable to taxpayers.

Too often it seems that government bailouts go to companies supposedly too big to fail or to individuals whose greed almost bankrupted America. Too little attention is paid to those whose talent, calling, and sacrifice is somehow taken for granted.

While there is much to applaud in many of the health care reforms that have been proposed, and will be resolved in the fall, making senior citizens second class citizens is not one of them.

Representing the Florida Long Term Care Community
