

Lawmakers, experts to meet on elderly care strategies

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Forget everything you know about long-term care for a minute.

Starting with just blue sky, come up with the best way of caring for the elderly that will improve quality of life while containing costs and allow for individual considerations such as family involvement and personal preferences.

That's what legislators, health care experts and others will be doing Feb. 1 at a conference in Oakland, which will include discussion of shortcomings in the current system of caring for the elderly and some ideas for improvements.

Central to the conference will be a study done in July by the **Jewish Healthcare Foundation** and the University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics. Among the findings was that Pennsylvania seriously lags behind other states in spending for home- and community-based services for the elderly, 21.9 percent of total spending compared to 64 percent in New Mexico, for example.

Nursing home care in Pennsylvania costs an average of \$77,646 annually per person, making skilled care among the more expensive options in caring for the elderly.

"It is often assumed that reductions in health care spending will inevitably lead to a decline in the quality of health care," according to the study. "But a review of the health care quality literature suggests many areas where we are not getting much for our investment, or even where more costly interventions have inferior outcomes."

What's more, there's a need to reduce unnecessary hospital readmissions, which adversely affect the elderly more than others, JHF President and CEO **Karen Feinstein** said. A pilot project to reduce hospitalizations and involving numerous skilled care facilities is under way in the Pittsburgh area. "If you want to keep seniors alert and able to live as independently as possible, you have to keep them out of the hospital," Feinstein said. "It's all about early intervention."

A review of medical records from eight nursing homes found that 40 percent of hospital admissions were inappropriate and that the residents could've been safely cared for at the facility, the study found. Another study found that 67 percent of nursing home hospitalizations in Georgia were potentially avoidable.

Among the health risks posed by hospitalization is an increase in hospital-acquired infections; for people ages 65 through 84, the infection rate is 38 percent higher than that general population. The study supports the introduction of Medicaid managed care in the nursing home population. It also recommends piloting the program to gauge effectiveness.

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