



October 1, 2019

Sen. Erin Herbig
Chair, Long-Term Care Workforce Study Commission

Rep. Jessica Fay
Chair, Long-Term Care Workforce Study Commission

Anna Broome
Senior Legislative Analyst
Maine State Legislature

Sen. Herbig and Rep. Fay,

I am president of the board of the Island Commons, a seven-bed (Level IV) residential care facility on Chebeague Island that is directly impacted by the shortage of workers in the field of long-term healthcare. I commend the legislature for creating this task force and hope that your deliberations will identify a path for the state and providers like us to solve this critical problem.

Enclosed with this letter is a copy of testimony I would like to submit for the record to the commission. It outlines some of the daily challenges (one might call them crises) we face in finding staff to fill our schedules and provide care for frail elders who otherwise would face dismaying options of relying on family or leaving Chebeague for care on the mainland – neither of which is a choice I hope they have to make.

My contact information is at the bottom of the testimony. I would be happy to provide more information in person or via correspondence.

Thank you and please try to find some answers – fast!

Sincerely,

Susan Q. Stranahan

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Testimony to the Long-Term Care Workforce Commission
on behalf of
Island Commons, Chebeague Island, Maine
October 1, 2019

The Island Commons is a seven-bed (Level IV) residential care facility on Chebeague Island, founded by volunteers to allow elders to remain in our small community, close to family and friends, when they are no longer able to live independently.

Since we welcomed our first resident 20 years ago, we have served more than 100 elders who otherwise would be forced to rely on family members for care or leave the island for a facility on the mainland. A large percentage of our residents and clients are dependent on MaineCare.

Just as Maine is the bellwether for the nation on the issues of aging, eldercare and workforce shortages, Chebeague is a microcosm of that crisis in the state. Simply put, we're living the crisis right now. Our survival as a provider of essential services on this island is in jeopardy.

Chebeague is the grayest of Maine's islands, with the median age of almost 63, compared to 44.6 for the rest of the state. We have a year-round population of 365. While several young families have moved to the island in recent years, they arrive with careers or childcare responsibilities and are not looking for employment.

Intensive recruiting for on-island workers has been unsuccessful despite offering above-market wages, benefits and an appealing workplace. Seven of our 10 full-time employees now live on the mainland, requiring them to commute via ferry to work, a logistical challenge and added expense. They are dedicated workers, willing to stand on the wharf at 6:30 a.m. in February to catch the boat to get to their jobs. There just aren't enough of them.

When we had a pool of island workers, a call-out for illness meant we could find a fill-in with a phone call or two. Now, only one of our full-time direct-care workers lives on Chebeague. With most of our staff "across the water" and limited by ferry schedules and distance, a call-out often forces on-duty staff to work extra shifts, grabbing a few hours' sleep on the office couch. Our resident care manager frequently is pressed into working overnight after completing a 12-hour daytime shift just because there isn't anyone else. Our license requires that we be fully staffed 24/7. Our administrator occasionally is forced to pitch in overnight when no one else is available.



The Commons also provides in-home care for elders. It is a valued service that enables frail members in our community to live at home with our caregiving assistance, relieving families and ensuring that medications, meals and housekeeping tasks are taken care of. We have been forced to turn down clients simply because we have no staff available to take on this additional work.

Once, operating deficits were the greatest challenge to the Commons' survival. Today, the greatest threat is staffing deficits. We can raise more money; we can't create more workers. We are at serious risk of staff-burnout, which will only worsen a dire situation.

In recognition of the severity of the problem, the Island Commons board recently approved paying ferry fees for our full-time mainland workers and raising hourly rates to well beyond what many facilities on the mainland pay, a significant expenditure for our small nonprofit. We only hope that these incentives will allow us to retain the staff we have.

One might ask, why do we work so hard to keep our doors open? The answer is simple: These are our neighbors living here. We are beloved by our community for the care we provide.

Maine has many small eldercare facilities like ours, located on unbridged islands or in rural parts of the state, serving an aging population with few options when help is needed. A number of these facilities have been forced to close in recent years, and more will suffer the same fate in the future for lack of workers. We hope are not one of them. What will become of this burgeoning segment of the state's population? What will become of our neighbors, our family members, our friends?

The board of the Island Commons urges the Long-Term Care Workforce Study Commission to identify the problems threatening the fragile network of long-term care providers in Maine and expeditiously propose solutions that will enable facilities like ours to continue to serve the elders in our community. The demographics of Maine dictate a swift and effective response.

On behalf of the Island Commons of Chebeague Island, we thank you for your work.

Susan Q. Stranahan
President, Board of Directors
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