

Lesley Fernow
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Dear Clerk Withee, Distinguished Members of the Committee on Health and Human Services
I am writing to urge the committee to support
LD 1573, HP1170An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Commission To Study
Long-term Care Workforce Issues -

I am Lesley Fernow, MD, a retired geriatrics internist and hospice physician, who spent the last six years of my career exclusively performing house calls. I have cared for people at all levels of the health care continuum including in nursing homes and long term care facilities, hospice and home care. I had a house call practice in both Fairfield County CT, and in Piscataquis County, ME. The difference between the care available to people living in these two regions could not be more stark. While people needing long term care in Fairfield County were able to remain home due to a large and diverse in-home care workforce, my patients in Maine who needed long term care usually ended up having to be cared for in a nursing facility, even when families and patients wanted to remain at home, because there were no available in-home caregivers. National research suggests that 90% of people want to remain at home and integrated into their communities. COVID has only magnified the tragedy of forced nursing home placement.

Every community in Maine has people of all ages needing long term care, services and supports due to disability or functional limitations. The most critical person in the long term care delivery process, I believe, is the nurse's aide or personal care attendant. Without this essential worker, care simply cannot be delivered appropriately, promptly and with dignity whether in a nursing facility or at home.

My experience in my house call practice is that while people at home might have access to such care, they do not in Maine due to a serious shortage of the carer workforce. The only options if you are a family member of someone at home needing such care is to do it yourself (and quit your job with all the financial and security sacrifices that decision entails), or to find placement for your loved one in a long-term care facility. This is not only an extraordinarily expensive option, but is undesirable for individuals and family members for best quality of life. Often, this option results in huge costs to the state for payment of institutional care. Furthermore, the carer workforce shortage in long term care facilities is also at crisis levels around the state.

Current care needs are not being met!

Home care is the future. It is a better option than institutionalization for most people. It needs to be recognized as a valuable service, and we need to find ways to make jobs as carers attractive. In order to develop a stable caring workforce which can deliver reliable and consistent care, we need to develop training programs, mentorships, and supervision opportunities. We also need to raise the pay of such jobs so that the people choosing them are not poverty-level workers. They must have opportunity for time off, paid overtime, training, support, and mentorship.

I strongly support the formation of a commission to study Long-Term Care Workforce issues. As we know, our population is aging. Needs are only increasing for this workforce development. Community input is vital in this commission. The time is now to create such a commission and to develop a 21st century plan for caring.

Lesley Fernow, MD, FACP