

My Turn: Helping the neediest in compassionate, sustainable ways

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Comments



Written by

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In the midst of news about the Occupy Wall Street movement and cleaning up after Irene, one news item almost got lost in the telling. The news that the Obama administration cut a critical, long-term care initiative from its health care reform plan is alarming at best and devastating at worst. While we all acknowledge the rising costs of health care, our most vulnerable populations are hardest hit by the constant cutting of these basic services.

Unlike many other societies, we keep putting our elderly and frail populations in harm's way instead of providing them with the care and respect they deserve.

Vermont is slated to be eighth in the nation for projected percent of population of residents age 65 or older by 2030. Today, many elderly Vermonters have an income that is only slightly above the federal poverty level and the expenses of daily living bring them close to or below the federally defined poverty threshold. According to a 2008 survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in older Vermont households (age 65 and older) 35.3 percent of the expenditures were for housing, 15.25 percent for transportation, 12.7 percent for food and 12.5 percent for health care. These expenses bring many of our elderly neighbors close to or below the federally defined poverty threshold.

For the past 30 years, Cathedral Square Corp. (CSC) has been Vermont's largest nonprofit provider of senior housing. Our mission is to create healthy homes, caring communities and positive aging. Cathedral Square looks for creative ways to insure our 24 housing communities are prepared to serve an increasingly frail senior population and that our existing properties, as well as new developments, are self-sustaining, environmentally sound, and serve as models for other housing organizations across the state and nation. Currently, 82 percent of Cathedral Square's residents are low-income (80 percent or below median area income) and the remaining 18 percent are moderate-income.

Cathedral Square has recently created an innovative program to ensure the safety and health of our housing community residents and neighbors. Our Support and Services at Home (SASH) program, dramatically expands our services to residents with the concurrent goal of saving Medicaid/Medicare dollars. SASH is offered in collaboration with our community partners, including the Visiting Nurse Association, area agencies on aging, hospitals, PACE, and others. SASH has been funded as part of Vermont's Blueprint for Health Medicare demonstration.

SASH is unique in many ways. It creates a system of care management and coordination that maximizes the highest and best use of health care providers and non-medical providers. SASH will be directly connected to primary care providers, hospitals, and community health providers through the Health Information Exchange. This ability to electronically communicate information greatly improves patient care support and coordination. SASH also develops a Community Healthy Aging Plan (CHAP) that identifies specific needs in each SASH population with evidence-based practices with proven outcomes. Specifically, SASH combines the three types of evidence-based interventions that have been demonstrated to be the most effective in increasing health outcomes and reducing hospitalizations for Medicare beneficiaries: transitional care interventions, self-management education interventions and coordinated care interventions. Finally, SASH is a person-centered solution. Self-direction for older adults is the core principle -- they tell us what they need to remain safely in their home communities.

While we are extremely proud of SASH's collective commitment to improving the welfare of Vermonters on Medicare, we are equally determined to provide affordable, customized coordination of health care services to more people in more communities. It can be done. Health care has become a polarizing budget and social services issue while leaving more and more people at risk of permanent health issues and long-term suffering. SASH offers clear and compelling evidence that if we work together, we have the resources to take care of our neediest population in ways that are cost effective, compassionate, and sustainable.

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