

Advocates worry about MassHealth changes to long-term care

More than 100 groups representing elderly and disabled individuals have written to Gov. Charlie Baker and legislative leaders asking for protections for people on **MassHealth** who need long-term support.



Al Norman

"They're concerned that consumers need to have choice, independence and control over long-term care," said **Al Norman**, executive director at Mass Home Care.

The letter from 112 groups, addressed to Baker, House Speaker Robert DeLeo, D-Winthrop, and Senate President Stan Rosenberg, D-Amherst, comes as the administration is looking at ways to cut costs in MassHealth. Part of that involves designing a model for managed care, in which large networks of doctors and hospitals, called accountable care organizations, will be responsible for coordinating a person's care. According to the advocates, this could unite a person's physical and behavioral health care and long-term services under a single group of providers. Long-term services are things like nursing home or at-home care.

The problem, according to the advocates, is that there are different values that need to be considered when managing a person's health care and their long-term needs. For example, long-term care providers need to take into account not only a patient's safety, but things like their independence and their living environment. The advocates' concern is that if the health care providers are also assessing a person's long-term care needs, the providers will either provide less care in order to save money or will refer people only to services that their own network of doctors provides.

"Elder and disabled rights organizations feel very strongly that there need to be checks and balances in managed care to prevent long-term supports from being overshadowed by medical care," said Mass Home Care President Dan O'Leary in a prepared statement.

The advocates are asking that there be an independent advocate representing the patient involved in any analysis of the patient's long-term care needs. The advocate will determine the necessary level of care, prevent the patient from getting unnecessary care and establish an individualized plan for the patient.

The current system of providing long-term care has an independent advocate, and Norman said the group wants to make sure that does not get lost during any reforms.

"This letter says if you're going to put all the Medicare and Medicaid money in the hands of big provider groups, we want there to be on that team an independent agent who represents the consumer and is guided by what the consumer wants rather than by a network of providers," Norman said.

To avoid financial conflicts of interest, Norman said, "It keeps a firewall between a determinant of what you need and who provides the services."

Michelle Hillman, a spokeswoman for the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, said the administration appreciates Mass Home Care's proposal and has been discussing these topics with advocates, member representatives, providers of long-term services and supports and others.

"We have held a number of public meetings and listening sessions with stakeholders including (long-term support services) providers from across the state, and (long-term support services) providers are very well represented and are actively engaged in reform discussions with MassHealth," Hillman said. "This fall, we are moving forward and will incorporate feedback to improve the quality and affordability of care for our members."

Signers of the letter include representatives of the Westfield Council on Aging, Elder Services of Berkshire County, WestMass ElderCare, Franklin County Home Care, Pittsfield Council on Aging, Greater Springfield Senior Services, North Adams Council on Aging and East Longmeadow Council on Aging.