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Medicaid proposal threatens Nursing Home Without Walls

By Tarky Lombardi Jr.

Thirty years ago, my colleagues and I in the state Legislature, together with Gov. Hugh Carey, were proud to enact legislation that created New York's Long Term Home Health Care Program (LTHHCP). Also known as the "Nursing Home Without Walls," this program delivers a nursing-home-level of care at home to patients of all ages who would otherwise be forced to live in institutions. Under the LTHHCP, patient care costs are capped at 75 percent of the Medicaid rate for nursing home care, yet the program has historically achieved a 50 percent cost-savings over institutional care, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars in savings shared by state, federal and local governments over the years.

The program was a major focus of the state's policy actions and evolved over time due to a real commitment by New York's home care provider community. At its core is a professional care management team that helps plan and provide a customized set of vital services to allow elderly, chronically ill and disabled patients to remain in their own homes rather than in institutions. Today, the program is operated by 108 providers

servicing more than 25,000 patients throughout New York state.

Like any important policy, the impetus for this program arose straight out of the needs expressed by constituents. During my time in the Senate, I heard from sons and daughters whose elderly or chronically ill parents needed long-term care but confronted a system where nursing homes were the sole option, where premature institutionalization was the norm incentivized by existing health care policies, and where many families experienced the frustration of not being able to keep their loved ones at home. Building and paying for nursing homes exclusively was a costly policy and an unaffordable, uncompassionate trend for New York's citizens.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the state Legislature have a daunting task to rein in the cost of Medicaid. I applaud and support the governor in his efforts. Indeed, the Nursing Home Without Walls was designed, in part, for the very same reasons of controlling Medicaid costs while successfully preventing institutionalization for thousands of New Yorkers. These patients are able to remain at home, cared for by their families, and sup-

ported at one-half the cost of what the state would otherwise spend.

In his budget proposals, Gov. Cuomo is rightfully attempting to enroll individuals with complex needs in programs that professionally manage and serve patients. However, as currently written in the budget's language, these patients would all be required to enroll in one type of program only — a managed care insurance model — instead of including and maximizing a program like the LTHHCP.

This restrictive policy would needlessly dislocate thousands of patients and destroy a program that saves millions of dollars and preserves quality of life.

The LTHHCP has been a national model, it has won national awards, and it has been a template for the federal government to craft its home- and community-based waiver programs. It is a proven success that should be expanded and not put in jeopardy of discontinuance.

Tarky Lombardi Jr. is a retired New York state senator from Syracuse who served from 1966 to 1992. He served as chairman of the state Senate Health Committee and the State Council on Health Care Financing, and sponsored the legislation creating New York's landmark Long Term Home Health Care Program.