

Restore state workers who protect the elderly in Iowa

Iowa ranks among the top states for residents over age 85. Adequate oversight of nursing homes is crucial to keep them safe.

Register Editorial

The Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals has many responsibilities. The most important: regulating more than 700 nursing homes and assisted living centers. Vulnerable seniors and their families expect the state to inspect these facilities and respond to complaints of neglect and abuse.

How well the state does that can mean the difference between life and death for elderly Iowans.

That's why the recent actions of the agency's new director, Rod Roberts, should scare the heck out of anyone who plans on growing old. Or anyone with an aging loved one who may need care in a facility.

During his first weeks in office, Roberts chose to eliminate 12 staff positions in nursing home oversight. Ten were inspectors. Two were attorneys who prosecute homes for violations that include abuse.

Cuts put Iowans at risk

Iowans need to send a message to Roberts and his boss, Gov. Terry Branstad: Your job is to protect older Iowans who are frequently sick, frail and can't protect themselves. That requires state workers. Find the money — perhaps the Medicaid fraud control fund — to restore cuts. Lawmakers must adequately fund the agency going forward.

During a meeting Thursday with Des Moines Register writers, Roberts said his agency's budget shortfall is the only reason for the cuts in workers. In the "health facilities" division of the agency, the shortfall for the current fiscal year is about \$240,000.

It's potentially at least \$470,000 for next fiscal year.

Shortfalls on paper result in putting real Iowans living in real nursing homes at real risk.

But Roberts isn't actively lobbying lawmakers for additional funding. He said he takes "a different approach" with lawmakers than some other agency directors — informing them about his budget rather than fighting for the dollars.

"Do you want more money for your agency?" an editorial writer finally asked.

"I would prefer that there be more money," he said.

He should insist on more money — loud and clear. Because if the director of an agency responsible for the welfare of vulnerable people isn't doing that, who will? Shortfalls on paper result in putting real Iowans living in real nursing homes at real risk.

Cuts mean loss of federal dollars

Also, cutting nursing home oversight staff saves the state little money — the equivalent of about 5 cents per person in a state of 3 million people. But the loss of federal matching dollars is huge.

The two attorneys Roberts eliminated were part-time. Funding their positions would have cost the state \$6,500 in the remaining four months of the fiscal year 2011 and about \$16,000 next year. Eliminating 10 of the state's 38 nursing home inspectors only saves the state about \$125,000 annually. But cutting these positions means Iowa loses hundreds of thousands of federal dollars that paid a big chunk of those salaries.

It doesn't make good budgetary sense. And it leaves the impression that Roberts and the governor who appointed him are really trying to reduce oversight of senior living facilities.

That would be in keeping with concerns Gov. Branstad expressed during his campaign about state inspectors being too tough on facilities. Regulators can't be too tough if there aren't enough of them to oversee homes and respond to complaints from Iowans.

This state has twice the percentage of residents in long-term-care facilities as the national average. In recent years Iowa has struggled to meet federal requirements for nursing home inspections. The number of complaints about homes continues to grow.

Iowa must protect those who can't protect themselves. It's the law. It's the right thing to do. But it won't happen if the work force responsible for oversight is decimated. Iowans should tell the governor and Roberts to get their priorities straight. And the two men must advocate for vulnerable seniors.



MARK MARTURELLO/REGISTER ILLUSTRATION

What do Iowans think about nursing home oversight? And what will budget cuts mean?

Eighty percent of Iowans age 50 and older say they support strengthening enforcement of quality standards in nursing homes. That was among the findings by AARP in a survey taken between Jan. 5 and Jan. 25 released last week.

"Iowans have come to grips with the fact that long-term care has, or will soon, impact their lives and their families, and they want to ensure that Iowa takes the right steps to meet the state's needs," said AARP Iowa State Director Bruce Koepl.

But the elimination of 10 nursing home inspectors and two attorneys at the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals is a step in the wrong

direction.

When Iowa lawmakers recently asked DIA staff how the elimination of these jobs will affect its ability to conduct inspections, the department responded that the time between inspections will likely increase. Also, complaint investigations will be delayed.

And budget cuts for next fiscal year could only make things worse. When lawmakers asked about a potential reduction of about \$390,000 in funding, the department responded that would "most likely result in layoffs" and the loss of millions of federal matching dollars.