

“It’s time to start putting solutions for seniors before penalties for nursing homes”
Statement from Lisa Haglund, President and Chief Executive Officer, Heritage Ministries

The seniors who are cared for in nursing homes and the people who care for them deserve better than a system that is constantly in survival mode. Yet, that’s literally the only option for many nursing home operators throughout New York State, including Heritage Ministries, the largest provider of skilled nursing care in Chautauqua County. Why? Because more than two years into a global pandemic – and facing a historic staffing crisis – New York State is still thinking punitively and not proactively.

As President and CEO of Heritage Ministries, I support the LeadingAge lawsuit that would prevent the state from enforcing minimum staffing standards for resident care and placing mandates on the amount of revenue spent on direct care. It’s time for New York State to start putting solutions for seniors before penalties for nursing homes.

As an organization, we further support the lawsuit because we believe that the premise of the two state laws contradict recent data about the statewide nurse shortage. A recent report from the Center for Health Workforce Studies found that more than 67 percent of New York State’s hospitals reported difficulty in recruiting and retaining registered nurses due to a workforce shortage. It’s wrong for the state to, on one hand, acknowledge a staffing crisis among healthcare workers, and on the other, impose significant penalties on nursing homes, and no other healthcare facilities, for not being able to meet minimum staffing levels.

Existing penalties for not providing 3.5 hours of care per resident per day were even further exacerbated this past weekend, when legislature approved additional fines when nursing homes requiring mandatory overtime in order to comply with the 3.5 hours requirement, even in times of declared emergency. No non-profit nursing home provider wants to require mandatory overtime of our nurses, but it’s often our only option to address severe staffing shortages and provide the care our seniors critically need and deserve. This industry cannot sustain these debilitating sanctions, and New York State can no longer afford to punish its way out of this problem.

Consistently operating in a state of crisis is costly, but at Heritage Ministries we do not, and will not, put a price tag on quality of care. As a not-for-profit nursing home organization, we pay costs for over 50 percent of our residents through our benevolence and multiple trusts that were set up years ago. State reimbursement rates cover less than half of the cost of care per resident per day, but we maintain our commitment to quality care and will not turn away residents. Recognizing that staff shortages and high turnover rates are often attributed to low wages, we’ve demonstrated our commitment to our staff with continuing increases in each of the last two years, in spite of financial challenges.

At Heritage Ministries, we’ve implemented many of our own programs to close the gap, including employee health and mental wellness services, incentive programs, and increased PTO, but the fact is, every dollar spent paying a penalty puts this industry further from funding actual solutions.

I repeat, it’s time for New York State to start putting solutions for seniors before penalties for nursing homes.