

## Nursing homes: Bad idea is back again

**Bad ideas have a way of reappearing in Tallahassee, especially when someone stands to profit from them.**

In this case, an unfair new system of reimbursing nursing homes for care — once thought to be deferred — has reappeared in an even uglier costume. The Florida Health Care Association Medicaid Reimbursement Plan is scheduled to be heard by the Florida Senate Appropriations Committee on Wednesday. The innocuous change — paying upfront for Medicaid payments — has been constructed in a way that would devastate many high quality nonprofit nursing homes. While the new plan ostensibly rewards quality, that's mostly window dressing. In fact, some of the state's lowest-rated nursing homes would receive windfall profits while some of the state's highest-rated homes would be penalized. It's a scheme only a lobbyist could love. Here is some of the information from River Garden in Jacksonville, one of Florida's highest rated and most ethical nursing home operators:

- The proposal changes the quality threshold needed to earn funds to a cynically low bar, in effect rewarding poor quality. As a result, a total of 152 nursing homes with four-star or five-star ratings would lose funding. River Garden, a five-star facility, would lose \$200,000.
- The plan shifts \$44 million from care to property and profits.
- There is no requirement that new dollars be spent on care.
- The plan is unfair to North Florida, sending a disproportionate amount to four South Florida counties. More than 60 percent of residents of nursing homes rely on Medicaid. By definition, they are poor. Nursing homes operate on thin profit

margins. Any reimbursement scheme that rewards profits over care is bound to hurt residents. There is an implication in this new plan that money is being wasted on care; a visit to Jacksonville's highly rating nonprofit nursing homes quickly explodes that idea. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with payments made up front. But care of our needy seniors needs to be the top priority. Leaders in Tallahassee need to stay with the current system that has been largely free of scandal and take a year to craft a plan that rewards quality of care. This new plan will hurt our elderly.

**PROTECT HOME RULE** There is something in the water at the state capitol that makes legislators think they're experts in everything. And so the concept of home rule is being lost to a thousand cuts of state rules and regulations. The latest example comes with a proposal that would deny local governments the ability to impose regulations stricter than the state's. Traditionally, local governments have been free to make rules more restrictive than the state's. Another example is a bill that would abolish Community Redevelopment Agencies that reverse blight. Another bill would regulate the ability of local governments to regulate small wireless antennae. Whatever happened to the credo that the best government is the one closest to the people? Leaders in Tallahassee would be better served by getting rid of bad laws already on the books rather than adding to them.

**DUVAL'S POOR HEALTH** Where are the least healthy counties in Florida? That's easy. They tend to be concentrated in North Florida. The least healthy county in the state is nearby Union at No. 67, followed by Gadsden, Madison, Putnam and Hamilton. Duval is the least healthy urban area in the state at No. 55. Comparing Duval with Florida metros:

- Orange (Orlando), No. 16.
- Miami-Dade, No. 23.
- Hillsborough (Tampa), No. 29. So what's going on in Duval? For one thing, this county has long had an unhealthy rate of smoking, which plays into many other unhealthy factors like a high obesity rate and too little exercise. Duval also has higher rates of driving deaths connected to alcohol. Curiously, being uninsured is less of an issue in Duval than in Hillsborough or Orange. Duval also has higher rates of children living in poverty and living in single-parent households. Even worse for Duval, the county's health ranking has been dropping in recent years. Mayor Lenny Curry, an enthusiastic jogger, is leading an effort toward a more healthy citizenry. The Duval County Medical Society Foundation and the YMCA are eager participants.

While exercise is essential — and evidence shows that even a little is helpful — more work on a local anti-tobacco campaign is likely to create many spinoff benefits.

**BEST RETIREMENT HAVENS** If you don't mind cold weather, here are the nation's best places to retire: No. 1: New Hampshire. No. 2: Colorado. No. 3: Maine. No. 4: Iowa. No. 5: Minnesota. Who says? [Bankrate.com](http://Bankrate.com) looked at these factors: Cost of living, health care quality, crime, cultural vitality, weather, taxes, senior citizens' well-being and the prevalence of other seniors. New Hampshire is high for low crime, good health care, low taxes, good culture and well-being of seniors. Florida, with its No. 17 overall ranking, ranked No. 1 as having lots of seniors. But the Sunshine State is middling in health care quality (No. 30) and crime (No. 39). Georgia is ranked No. 35. Its cost of living (No. 13) is much better than Florida's (No. 27), even though Florida has no state income tax.