

WHERE I STAND

Conn. must fund home-based care now

By Tracy Wodatch

Just a few short weeks ago, the legislative session in Hartford ended on a deeply disappointing note for thousands of Connecticut's most vulnerable residents. Advocates for home-based care, along with the families we serve, spent months pleading with the governor and legislators to address a crisis two decades in the making. We asked for a meaningful increase in Medicaid reimbursement rates to stabilize a sector on the brink.

The response? A sympathetic but clear rejection, citing a familiar reason: the state simply didn't have the revenue. Imagine our shock, then, when a mere 16 days after the session closed, the state announced it had identified an additional \$190 million in projected revenues. The money, it turns out, may have been there all along.

We understand that state policymakers in Hartford need to rely on complex budgetary projections, which can often change dramatically based on factors that are external to Connecticut. Our aim is not to point fingers or look backward. Rather, Connecticut needs to look forward to a very simple choice: will we continue to jeopardize a vital service relied on by thousands of state residents, or will we convene a special session to right this wrong and deliver the support that home care providers and their patients desperately need?

The importance of home-based care is not in dispute. For thousands of seniors, individuals with disabilities, and people with serious and chronic illness, receiving care at home is the essential thread that holds their lives together. It allows them to remain in the place they feel most secure, surrounded by familiar comforts and loved ones. This isn't just a preference, it is a vital component of compassion and effective health care.

It is also a remarkable bargain for the state. When we keep people healthy and safe in their own homes, we prevent costly and unnecessary hospitalizations and nursing home placements — settings that are far more expensive for taxpayers and, often, not where people want to be. Investing in home care is a strategic investment that saves Connecticut money and preserves critical resources within our broader health care system.

And yet, our state has failed to make this invest-

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ment, year after year. Aside from temporary federal relief during the pandemic, Connecticut has not significantly increased Medicaid rates for home health services in more than 20 years. In that time, the costs for labor, transportation, and essential medical supplies have skyrocketed. This unsustainable funding model has pushed dedicated home care agencies to the financial edge, forcing them to make impossible choices.

The crisis is compounded by a stark inequity in state policy. Last year, the state rightly approved a substantial wage increase for independent personal care attendants. However, agency-based caregivers, who perform similar work for the same vulnerable populations, were left out entirely.

This has created a workforce exodus, as skilled nurses and aides leave for higher-paying jobs in other sectors or in neighboring states with

more competitive reimbursement rates. As a result, agencies are struggling to staff cases, and families are left scrambling to find the care they were promised.

A recent Connecticut Medicaid Rate Study confirmed what we have been saying for years: our state's reimbursement rates are woefully behind comparable states and Medicare benchmarks. We are actively exporting our health care workforce to neighboring states and diminishing access to care for our own residents.

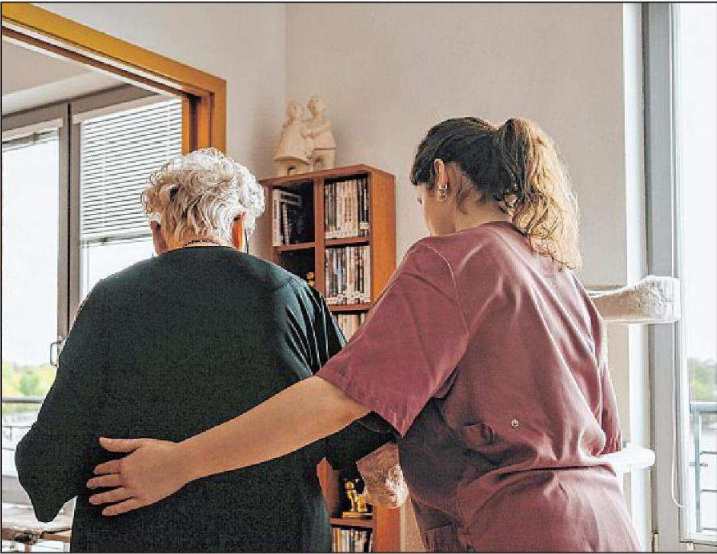
The argument that Connecticut couldn't afford to fix this has been proven false. The \$190 million surplus is not abstract money; it is a tangible resource that can be deployed to solve a real and immediate crisis. It can provide the rate increase that allows an agency to keep its doors open.

It can fund the competitive wage that convinces a nurse to stay in the field. It can ensure a care-at-home resident receives the visits they need to avoid a medical emergency.

This is not a partisan issue. It is a human issue and a fiscal imperative. We are calling on legislative leaders and the governor to do what is right. They must convene a special session in the coming months to allocate a portion of these surplus funds to home care. Let's end the cycle of neglect and build a sustainable system that honors the wishes of our residents and recognizes the immense value of care at home.

The money is there. The need is undeniable. All that's missing is the political will to act.

Tracy Wodatch is the president and CEO of the Connecticut Association for Health Care at Home.



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FORUM

Let's keep working on our democracy

By Sen. Jorge Cabrera

Over the last decade we have witnessed a deep polarization in our country. With the fraying of social connections exacerbated by the rapid growth of online living, the COVID pandemic, and the breakdown of social mores in our politics and culture, Americans are more divided than they've been in a generation.

We often don't talk to each other or listen well. Too often, we're simply listening to respond, and are constantly searching for clues to discern which side someone is on but not seeking to genuinely engage in the hard work of personal communication. There is too much fear, anxiety and distrust among us and not enough humility, love and empathy.

When I was growing up there was an implicit deal that resonated throughout American culture. My parents, like many American parents, struggled to make ends meet. We didn't have much economically, but we had hope — a hope that gave us the faith and strength to face hardship with courage, and a family and community that supported us. We knew times would be tough. We lived it every day. But we also knew that if we worked hard, played by the rules, and kept the faith, eventually things would get better for us and especially for our children and grandchildren. I was told just keep doing the right thing every single day and your life will improve. That was the deal. And for many families, like mine, it worked.

But today — with rapid economic change disappearing millions of good, solid middle-class jobs, with many college graduates saddled with student loan debt, and with wages that haven't kept pace with the cost of living — many Americans believe that the "system" is rigged and that the values of hard work and perseverance that were handed down by their grandparents and parents don't work anymore.

That disillusionment has created a ripe environment for opportunistic politicians to further divide us in order to achieve political power in the service of those forces that seek to make lots of money off the backs of the very people they claim they want to help. They have weaponized virtually everything in pursuit of their greed. Nothing is sacred — not

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God, sexuality, race, religion, culture, language, sports, entertainment or clothing. They have poisoned our public conversation to the point where genuine inquiry and civility have taken a back seat to dialogue that's too often caustic and rife with ugly personal attacks. The public search for the truth has been severely eroded and has been replaced with lies and disrespect about the democratic process.

Much of the fear and anxiety that we feel is justified in the immense loss of opportunity that many are living through, and the disillusionment many feel when their hard work stops paying off.

As we reflect on the July 4 holiday and what it means to be an American in the 21st Century, we need to reimagine our public policies to stop this psychic and economic bleeding. We need a politics that meets our needs in this rapidly changing world: that means your work must pay your bills; when you get sick it shouldn't bankrupt you; your children should be able to afford a higher education; and those with ample means should pay their fair share. When opportunities are abundant, we all benefit, and our democracy truly thrives.

Our 249-year-old system of government isn't perfect. Democracy can be frustratingly messy, but it can work if we work at it. In this month of our celebrating our nation's independence, remember the original promise of America, and the millions who have toiled, sacrificed and died for that promise and the freedoms we enjoy. Every generation must muster the courage to fight to form that more perfect union — something that will require us to see beyond ourselves and our own communities. But, like so many before us, I will choose to work at it. Because democracy works if you work at it.

State Sen. Jorge Cabrera is a Democrat from Hamden.

