

How the Trump administration could impact nursing home care in Tennessee

Tennessee's Long-Term Care Ombudsman program is hoping for a nearly \$1 million boost in state funding to address rising nursing home complaints.



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Long-term care advocates are waiting to see how the incoming Trump administration will impact staffing shortages in Tennessee's nursing homes as complaints over quality of care continue to skyrocket.

In a nation struggling with nursing home staffing shortages, Tennessee ranks near the bottom for senior care with some of the highest vacancy and turnover rates.

The problems were exacerbated in the pandemic, with citations for the most serious federal deficiencies over resident health or safety jumping 145% in Tennessee's nursing homes from 2020 to 2022, according to the state Health Facilities Commission.

The Biden administration in a push to address the issue established new staffing minimums for nursing homes that were set to go into effect in 2026, but critics say the plan could drive some homes out of business as they struggle to meet unrealistic goals.

In October, nearly two dozen Republican state attorneys general, including Tennessee Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti, sued the Biden

administration over the federal rule, saying it poses a threat to the nursing home industry.

And they could see more support from the incoming Trump administration as it focuses on deregulation, according to industry experts.

“We’re watching to see what will happen and how the new administration will make sure residents get quality care in these facilities,” Tennessee’s Long-Term Care Ombudsman Teresa Teeple said.



A rise in complaints

The number of complaints over nursing home care has continued to increase in Tennessee since the pandemic.

The state's long-term care ombudsman program, which advocates for nursing home residents and helps to investigate complaints, saw record numbers last year with 4,582 complaints, up 24% from 2022.

Teeple said the program is on track to see about the same number of complaints this year as facilities continue to struggle with staffing issues.

Among the major concerns, she said ombudsmen are seeing a rise in serious allegations of abuse, neglect and exploitation as nursing homes struggle to find and retain quality staff.

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She said many facilities loosened staff training requirements during the pandemic, which could be contributing to the problem.

In another concern, Teeple said too few well-performing assisted care living facilities are accepting TennCare CHOICES (the state's medicaid program for adults) forcing many elderly people to move hours away from their communities and loved ones to find affordable care.



Of 329 assisted care facilities in Tennessee, roughly 70 accept TennCare and many have waitlists, she said.

In March, residents of Victoria Square, an assisted living facility in Rockwood west of Knoxville, were forced to move nearly two hours away after the facility's license was suspended for substandard care.

Teeple said some providers have told her they can't afford to provide care to residents at TennCare reimbursements rates. She said the problem will continue to grow as the state's population grows.

"It's only going to get worse if we don't address this," she said.

Tennessee's worst ranked nursing homes

Tennessee regularly ranks among the 10 worst states for average fines and delayed inspections, according to a database of CMS data compiled by the nonprofit investigative news organization ProPublica.

As of October, Tennessee ranked fourth in the country for percentage of nursing homes that are behind schedule for inspections, meaning they haven't had a standard inspection for two or more years.

Tennessee has three of the top 10 nursing homes in the nation with the highest number of series deficiencies causing immediate jeopardy to residents. All are located in Memphis — Midtown Center For Health And Rehabilitation, Parkway Health And Rehabilitation Center and Majestic Gardens At Memphis Rehab & Skilled Nursing Center.

Ombudsman funding boost

While the state is facing challenges in elder care, Teeple said it's moving in the right direction with the newly designated Tennessee Department of Disability and Aging.

She said her program is hopeful it will receive a boost in funding of just under \$1 million in the governor's upcoming budget. The funds would help pay for more ombudsman since the state currently has just 17.5 full-time ombudsman for 700 long-term care facilities across 95 counties..

Tennessee is one of the few states that does not have designated state funding for its long-term care ombudsman program.

As they handle the influx of complaints, Teeple said improving staffing ratios is critical for quality care.

The Biden administration's staffing mandate would require an increase in staffing for homes that are not meeting the basic care requirements and would ensure a registered nurse would be on site at all times, she said. How the Trump administration will handle the issue remains to be seen.

“Staffing is the most critical piece of the puzzle,” she said. “Caring for folks is a tough job physically and emotionally, and if you don’t pay people well enough to stay, they’ll move on to other jobs.”