

Introduction

POLICY FORUM

Long-Term Care: Are We Ready to Meet Expected Needs and Demand?

In North Carolina, and across the nation, people ages 65 and older represent the fastest growing segment in the population. Nearly 2.3 million baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) are now reaching retirement age in North Carolina. North Carolinians are also living longer than ever before and more of us are living with chronic disease and disability. Given this inevitable demographic shift, and considering the unique characteristics of the elderly component of our population, the state is racing to determine how to best meet their needs. Research suggests that there will be a growing demand for services and supports in long-term care, transportation, education, health, and nutrition for the elderly. More people will require either community-based or institutionalized care, both which have the potential to place significant financial and emotional burdens on family members as well as put pressure on government budgets.

Currently, the long-term care industry is very complex, highly regulated, and quite fragmented. This situation often makes it difficult for individuals and their family members to determine the best way to meet their current or anticipated long-term care needs. There are major choices to consider when planning for long-term care, including whether or not to be cared for at home or in long-term care facility. Evidence tells us more and more individuals are interested in receiving care in the comforts of their own home as opposed to seeking care at assisted living or long-term care facilities. This preference has led to an “aging in place” industry which encompasses personal care services and home health care provided by direct care workers including nurse aides, home health care aides, and personal care workers who work outside the walls of traditional long-term care facilities. However, due to the added costs of this option or the inability of informal caregivers to effectively function in this way, this is not always an option.

When the needs of individuals can no longer be met by their home or community-based caretakers, individuals may be transitioned into long-term care, such as a skilled nursing or assisted living facility. We have to recognize that there is often stigma surrounding nursing homes and concerns with quality and the level of compassion in the care found in these institutions. The long-term care sector must deal with the public’s demands for greater regulation combined with their often conflicting call for greater choice and freedom, while still offering affordable and desirable options. Fortunately in North Carolina, a combination of state, local, and private organizations have been effective in creating and implementing innovative approaches for the regulation of facilities, the organization and coordination of services, and even in pioneering staff training in long-term care facilities—all with the aim to improve patient safety, quality of care, and overall satisfaction.

In this issue of the *North Carolina Medical Journal* we hear from various individuals involved in the long-term care industry, including nurses, lawyers, policymakers, and other interest groups who describe current and future issues in North Carolina and possible ways to address them. Additionally, we explore how North Carolina is leading the way in training and attracting a qualified long-term care workforce through new and innovative programs. Through this collection of articles, we hope to present a broad range of views and opinions, with the ultimate goal of drawing some much-needed attention to the important issues within the field of long-term care.

Thomas C. Ricketts III, PhD, MPH
Editor-in-Chief

Christine Nielsen, MPH
Managing Editor