

State must protect elderly

Testimony delivered by the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault, to the Nursing Home Safety Task Force on Tuesday, Oct. 20.

Elderly Illinois citizens who live in nursing homes and other citizens who reside in nursing homes due to serious or chronic medical conditions deserve to be safe. That means nursing homes must be safe. They should be a place where the elderly and those who have chronic or disabling illnesses can live without fear of abuse and violence. As the Chicago Tribune report has made shamefully clear, this is not always the case. It is now up to us as citizens and leaders of our state to change that.

We must begin by protecting the most vulnerable from those who prey upon their vulnerability. Those who are chronically mentally ill with a history of violence and those convicted of violent crimes should not be permitted to reside side by side with other nursing home residents. A nursing home is not the place to test the rehabilitation of violent offenders. It is not the place to see if the fox can live peacefully in the hen house. We must move to eliminate the possibility of violence and protect the elderly who should not be marked with a bullseye during their twilight years.

Specifically, residents who live in nursing homes due to their age or medical needs should live in units that are physically separate from or secure from those who pose a threat. Those who live in a nursing home due to violence associated with mental illness and or release from detention, jail, prison, drug addiction, should have a locked door between them and those they could harm. A convicted sex offender should not be able to cross the room or the hallway to find a vulnerable victim.

And if we don't want to create locked units, we need to create separate facilities or campuses. The State of Illinois cannot continue to house those who pose a risk of violence alongside those who have no defense. Whether the barriers are locked doors or miles of distance, we have to build the barrier that will keep an offender from harming potential victim.

Nursing homes also must have clear, user-friendly procedures for reporting and responding to incidents of violence, especially sexual violence. And these procedures must be victim-focused, for that is crucial in a victim's recovery and an offender's accountability. Without institutionalizing procedures for handling abuse, every nursing home resident will not have the same guarantee of assistance or safety. In the case of incidents of sexual abuse or rape, the procedures must include collaboration with a local rape crisis center so the victim can receive the specialized assistance that rape crisis center counselors and advocates can provide. If we adopt standard procedures for responding to abuse, we make sure every resident has the same guarantee of assistance and safety.

Additionally, we need to train nursing home workers – everyone from the manager to the nursing staff to those who serve the meals. All workers need to understand violence, the harm it causes to victims, the warning signs and the appropriate response to a victim's disclosure of feared or actual harm. Workers need to assume responsibility for resident safety and recognize that denial does not keep people safe. Nursing home staff is the front line of defense for those in their care and a crucial ally in preventing violence.

Thank you for your time. Together we can make nursing homes safe for our elderly in Illinois.

Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault