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Springfield seniors fight for quality medical care
Statewide tour highlights impact of devastating cuts

SPRINGFIELD, IL – The Health Care Council of Illinois (HCCI), a leading voice for the
nursing home community, brought its multicity tour to Springfield today to fight for funding for
essential medical services such as dental, vision and podiatry care. The event and news
conference at Heritage Health - Springfield urged legislators to support a bill that would rollback
cuts to care for vulnerable seniors.

“Last year the legislature cut vital medical services for nursing home residents to save money,”
Pat Comstock, executive director of HCCI, said. “Our residents suffer, and the state hasn’t seen
the savings it anticipated. Illinois continually balances the budget on the backs of nursing home
residents who rely on Medicaid. We can’t stand by when frail, elderly nursing home residents are
denied critical, life-sustaining medical services.”

According to the Illinois Department of Healthcare and family Services, the state had projected
to save $1.6 billion but has fallen 30 percent short, failing to realize savings of $464 million. The
nursing home industry says that their residents have borne far too high of a burden under the
state’s cuts and that the quality of life for the elderly has suffered far too much.

“It’s shameful,” said Comstock. “To deny people the ability to eat solid food because the state
claims there isn’t enough money for dentures. These are real people who have worked hard for
their whole lives. They deserve proper medical care so they can live the rest of their lives with
dignity.”

Nursing home residents and their family members as well as staff from Heritage Health -
Springfield attended today’s event, which is part of a statewide tour to generate awareness for the
campaign to Be a Star for Nursing Home Residents. Attendees signed a banner that will be
present at all of the tour stops and which will be delivered to Governor Quinn. They also signed

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cards which HCCI will take to legislators in an effort to get the General Assembly to restore funding for essential healthcare services.

“Residents with Medicaid have no access to dental care except for emergencies,” said Administrator Kiel Peregrin. “Very few residents can get podiatry care. Elderly folks with deteriorating vision can’t read the newspaper or a letter from a loved one because they get only one pair of glasses every two years. Every day I see the devastating impact it can have on nursing home residents. It’s unacceptable.”

Dental care is one area dramatically affected by Medicaid cuts in the SMART Act last year. Current law does not allow for nursing home residents to receive any dental care unless it is an emergency. For example, dentures are no longer covered by Medicaid. If a resident’s dentures break they could be forced to receive nourishment through a feeding tube. According to Duke University Health System, prolonged use of a feeding tube can cause pneumonia, infection and diarrhea, among other problems.

Dental professionals have also called on legislators to restore funding for dental care, which is crucial to the health of seniors with Medicaid. “This undue burden of allowing for extractions without replacing the teeth with dentures needs to be addressed,” said Dave Marsh Director of Governmental relations for the Illinois State Dental Society. “Restoring (funding) for dentures will go a long way in insuring that the most needy citizens, many in nursing homes can function and eat their food if faced with the need for an extraction which is the only remaining service covered under the adult Medicaid program.”

According to Peregrin, nursing homes across the state have had to dramatically cut back the services that outside medical professions provide for seniors with Medicaid. “Only patients with diabetes receive podiatry care now,” said Peregrin. “But there are many other residents who have medical conditions that also cause poor circulation and loss of feeling in their lower extremities. Even a small cut to a resident’s foot can result in gangrene and lead to amputation. This isn’t just a perk for these residents; it’s a serious medical necessity.”

Professionals in the field of podiatry have also decried the cuts in funding for care to Medicaid patients. “Lack of podiatric care threatens the overall health of elderly people in many ways and greatly diminishes their quality of life,” said Dr. Michael J. Hriljac, Executive Director of the Illinois Podiatric Medical Association. “We support the HCCI's call to restore Medicaid coverage for podiatric care for nursing home residents.”

Medicare does cover dental care and nail care in some circumstances, but not every nursing home resident qualifies for Medicare. Residents between age 60 and 65 would have access to Medicare only if they receive Social Security disability benefits.
HCCT’s Hollywood themed multicity tour is raising awareness of these funding and medical issues in advance of Illinois Nursing Home Week which kicks off on May 6th. The tour will unite nursing home staff, residents and family members at eight facilities around a common theme of ensuring quality care for the state’s nursing home residents.

The Health Care Council of Illinois (HCCI) is a professional association of more than 500 nursing facilities committed to quality residential health care in Illinois through a productive and responsible partnership between the private and public sectors. HCCI represents more than 100,000 nursing home professionals serving more than 78,000 residents.

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