

Minnesota Nursing Homes Continue to Innovate to Respond to the Changing Nature of Care

The recent three-part series in the *Star Tribune* highlighting falls in Minnesota's nursing homes fails to share the full story and provide readers with the appropriate context regarding nursing home care in Minnesota. Statistics clearly show that our population is aging, but there also are several relevant issues related to our aging population where data only tells part of the story.

Minnesota's providers continue to innovate for care environments and technologies for older adults. Today, we have an expansive array of care options for older adults to meet their individual needs in the right place and at the right time in their life's journey. As a community, we hold great pride in providing safe and personalized care while giving seniors freedom and autonomy as they age. However, at times freedom has risk, sometimes in the most basic activities of daily life.

Falling is one of those risks. We have abandoned the practice of controlling the risk of falling through the use of physical restraints or psychotropic drugs, and have led the nation in striking a balance between encouraging seniors to embrace personal freedoms as they age, with providing the care that they need and deserve. Whether in a nursing home or at home, there is no perfect solution to prevent or eliminate falls in the elderly. Problems with gait, balance, muscle weakness, vision, hearing, and dementias are common contributing factors, and a variety of chronic diseases and conditions, as well as age itself, also contribute to falls.

We continue to learn and improve our fall prevention programs for older adults as new products and services are developed – there are a variety of solutions that may work for particular residents: gait training, the use of assistive devices like walkers, reviewing medications that may have adverse effects, using lifts to transfer residents from bed to chair, staff assistance while walking and treating other problems like incontinence that can lead to falls.

Data from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) suggests that Minnesota is making progress on reducing the frequency of falls. Between 2000 and 2009, the proportion of residents with falls in the preceding 30 days was reduced by five percent. This is remarkable, given that over that same time period, Minnesota's use of physical restraints was cut by two-thirds. Minnesota's use of physical restraints is now less than half the national average – striking the balance between safety while allowing for more autonomy and freedom for nursing home residents.

Nursing homes serve nearly 34,000 Minnesotans every day. During the period of time examined by the two reporters, there were more than 400,000 persons who received nursing home care and the percentage of residents who died as a result of a fall was less than 0.3 percent. We continue to strive for improvement through new fall prevention measures, and to create an even safer living environment for those who need our services, and according to CMS, our facilities score among the top states on key overall quality measures.

As we look to the future and strive to deliver the best possible care for all of our residents we must, as a caring community, as sons and daughters and as a state prioritize the care of our older adults and invest in their future. We are indeed fortunate to have individuals who have already taken that pledge – our committed and well-trained corps of excellent caregivers. However, years of underfunding by the state has hit this workforce hard – in the form of reduced benefits, wage freezes and staff layoffs. With proper and responsible investment in older adult services now and in the future, more can be done and additional progress can be made.

If you would like more information about how to prevent falls, please visit the Minnesota Falls Prevention program's website at <http://www.mnfallsprevention.org/>.

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