

House Dems Seek Boost In Nursing Home Staffing

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by Julie Rovner

Nurse-to-patient staffing ratios identified in a recent report by HHS would be made mandatory under legislation unveiled by a group of House Democrats today. The report, ordered by Congress 12 years ago, concluded that 90 percent of nursing homes are staffed insufficiently to provide adequate care. The bill, which will be formally introduced next week by Democratic Reps. Jan Schakowsky of Illinois, Brad Carson, of Oklahoma and Henry Waxman of California, along with Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton of the District of Columbia, would require that facilities have sufficient staff to provide 4.1 to 4.85 hours of nursing care daily for each resident, including at least 1.7 hours of individual care by registered or licensed nurses.

To help homes pay for the added staff, the measure would restore the "Boren Amendment" that was repealed in 1997 as part of the Balanced Budget Act. That amendment, sponsored by former Sen. David Boren, D-Okla., required states to provide "reasonable and adequate" reimbursement under Medicaid to nursing homes. It would also boost federal Medicaid "matching rates" to states by 1.5 percentage points. "You cannot meet federal standards without federal money," said Norton. A spokesman for the American Health Care Association, which represents nursing homes, said the organization welcomes the attention to the issue of understaffing, but that the bill represents "a magic wand approach" to the problem. "The first step is to find the people," the spokesman said, noting that more than half a million nurses and nurses' aides are currently needed. "We hope not to get a mandate until the workforce is there," he added. - by Julie Rovner