Ageism is real, and older Missourians pay the price

BY DANIEL REXROTH

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The Show-Me State is in a real crisis — one of its own making.

Missouri is neglecting its most vulnerable citizens by refusing to provide adequate reimbursement for care and services provided under Medicaid. As a result, the care provided to our state’s oldest citizens at skilled nursing centers is being threatened today. And if this trend continues, that care may not be accessible in the future.

As the president and CEO of John Knox Village, a not-for-profit life planning community in Lee’s Summit, I’ve seen firsthand how important Medicaid is to our seniors. We’ve been taking care of older adults for 48 years now, and we take great pride in making sure seniors throughout the area receive the care and services they both need and deserve.

However, Missouri is electing not to provide adequate reimbursement to its own citizens who happen to be a little older and in need of some assistance. Many are not able to advocate for themselves. Therefore, we must do this important job for them.

It’s no secret that ageism is alive and well. You see it in the greeting card aisle at the grocery store. When people announce their retirement, their friends and co-workers wear black and ask when they are moving to the nursing home. While these types of jokes are humorous to some, they perpetuate the myth that older adults are no longer contributing and important members of our society — a notion that could not be further from the truth.

Unfortunately, these stigmatizing societal attitudes are now being fostered on the state level. Our elected officials are placing less value on our seniors by significantly minimizing the amount of assistance the state is willing to reimburse the providers who are taking care of the most frail Missourians.

The typical resident of a long-term care facility who relies on Medicaid funding is a widowed female in her 80s with multiple health conditions. She is probably middle class and had savings when she retired. However, usually through no fault of her own, she has outlived her financial resources and has turned to the state for financial assistance through Medicaid. She needs the state to pay for the cost of care she can no longer afford. She is not looking for anything extravagant — just assistance with her basic needs.

Missouri knows the cost of care, and yet sets its Medicaid rate at just $15.26 per day out of its general revenue for each of its skilled nursing residents. This reimbursement amount is not enough to provide even average care. By contrast, Missouri’s neighboring states pay long-term care facilities on average $48.22 per day — a rate that is more than three times the amount Missouri pays. In comparison, Missouri does pay $60 per day out of its general revenue to take care of prisoners in state custody — again, compared to $15.26 for our seniors.

Shouldn’t our seniors at least receive the same amount of support from their state as criminals?

Our senior citizens are the backbone on which this state is built. They contributed their blood, sweat and tears into building our communities. They took care of us. And now it’s time for us to take care of them, especially the seniors of Missouri who rely on Medicaid.

Bottom line? Missouri is neglecting its senior citizens. Please contact your state representative to encourage them to fix Medicaid funding and to quit using it to solve the state’s funding challenges.

*Daniel Rexroth is president and CEO of John Knox Village in Lee’s Summit.*