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Editorial: Don't relent

Lawmakers should cut nursing-home budget, not kowtow to pressure

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Ohio is close to making a long-overdue adjustment in funding for the long-term care of the elderly, and legislators should resist pressure to back down.

The House-passed budget for 2012-13 includes cuts of \$427 million to the appropriation for nursing homes. It is part of a needed shift toward in-home care and other options for seniors who don't need to be in nursing homes. The proposal is unprecedented, following decades of kowtowing by lawmakers to the deep-pocketed nursing-home lobby.

As the budget moves to the full Senate, nursing-home interests are pressing hard with a campaign to reverse the cuts. An initial TV-ad campaign backfired; heavy-handed ads essentially accusing Gov. John Kasich of booting old people off of life support were so offensive that their sponsor, the Ohio Health Care Association, was forced to pull them.

That unseemly campaign was no surprise. While Kasich's budget plan for nursing homes is based on facts, the nursing-home industry cannot justify its privileged access to taxpayer dollars, so resorts to terrifying seniors by telling them their care is in danger, when the only thing in danger is the taxpayer-provided gravy train that nursing-home operators have enjoyed for so long.

The facts are that nursing homes have an average 15 percent vacancy rate, which means that they could take in nearly 18 percent more patients without adding a bed. In addition, the industry's years of inordinate influence over the legislature has left Ohio out of balance and out of the national mainstream in long-term-care funding. Ohio devotes a far bigger proportion of such spending to nursing homes than the national average. The daily reimbursement rate of \$177 per patient is \$4.75 above the national average. With nearly 54,000 Medicaid patients in nursing homes on an average day, that adds up to \$256,500 in higher-than-average payments per day, or \$93.6 million per year.

More funding for in-home programs such as PASSPORT, if any can be found, makes much more sense. In-home care not only is preferred by most seniors, it also is far less expensive than nursing-home care. The legislature should stand with the governor to defend the interests of Ohio's seniors.

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