

SCRANTON TIMES-TRIBUNE

Scrutiny of care homes lagging

BY JAMES HAGGERTY, STAFF WRITER

03/31/2007

Three quarters of the personal care homes in Lackawanna County have expired licenses because of delays in state inspections.

Seventeen of the county's 23 personal care homes are operating under lapsed certification, awaiting overdue annual inspections, state Department of Public Welfare spokeswoman Stacey Ward said.

"We are fully aware of all the facilities that have expired licenses," Ms. Ward said. "If we had any concern for the health and safety of residents in those facilities, we would immediately move to take action."

The local situation mirrors one statewide in which 1,190 of the 1,589 personal care homes are operating with expired licenses, DPW reported. The agency is also bringing potential closure actions against 30 facilities statewide, though Ms. Ward said she was unable to say if any are in Lackawanna County.

Social service advocates say the situation poses potential safety and quality-control issues.

"Without the type of oversight needed ... there's often the tendency that it might slide and therefore, the quality might suffer," said Dan Loftus, executive director of the NEPA Center for Independent Living, an advocacy organization based in Scranton that serves 10 regional counties.

More work, same staff

Personal care homes are different from nursing homes in that they do not provide medical care. They do provide meals, supervision and assistance with everyday tasks, typically for older people or those with various disabilities.

State law directs the Department of Public Welfare to inspect and license each home annually, checking for fire safety, staff training and education, nutrition and meal preparation, resident care, physical site conditions and other factors.

Observers blame the state's failure to fulfill that requirement on an upgrade in licensing regulations and a shortage of personal care home inspectors.

New regulations took effect in October 2005 toughening the licensing process, particularly regarding the administration of medication, staff training and fire safety, Ms. Ward said.

Administrators at care homes say the inspectors have an extra workload from the new regulations.

“They have a huge problem and have taken it on. With that said, it’s an emergency,” said Corey Rowley, executive director of the Harrisburg-based Statewide Independent Living Council. “I really do expect they will move mountains to start addressing this.”

The state now has only 32 personal care home inspectors, along with seven supervisors. The regional office, based in Scranton, has only five inspectors responsible for inspections and investigations covering 21 eastern counties.

“We have the same limited staff doing double duty,” Ms. Ward said.

“It’s just overwhelming. How could you get caught up?” Teresa Osborne, executive director of the county’s Area Agency on Aging, said of the staffing shortage.

More inspectors planned

The department is adding 10 more inspectors this year, Ms. Ward said. She was unable to say whether any would be assigned to the local office.

Managers at care homes with expired licenses said they understand the inspectors’ plight, but feel uneasy about technically being out of compliance.

“It’s not the facility’s fault, but the state’s delay in the implementation and follow-up,” said Paco Peters, administrator for Allied Terrace, a care home run by Allied Services. “The fact that they are behind is no one’s fault but their own.”

Ilise Rubinow, administrator at Elan Gardens in Clarks Summit, said her facility was inspected last week and anticipates a renewed license shortly.

“The time it takes to do an inspection has increased probably about five to 10 times the amount of hours it used to take to do an inspection of a facility,” Ms. Rubinow said. “We don’t like to be out of compliance. ...It is out of the control of the providers.”

Social service administrators said the situation leaves concerns for safety and care quality until it is resolved.

“My fear would be complacency: the feeling that, ‘Oh they’re so far behind they’ll never get to us,’” said Ms. Osborne, of the Agency on Aging. “If nobody’s checking, what risk does that put the individual at?”

Ms. Ward said the department is stepping up inspection and licensing efforts to rectify the problem.

“We are working immediately to address the situation and we will have it done by the end of the year,” she said.

http://www.thetimes-tribune.com/site/news.cfm?newsid=18153445&BRD=2185&PAG=461&dept_id=415898&rfi=6