




GOVERNOR'S PLAN

The Long-Term Care Community Choices Act of 2008 is Gov. Phil Bredesen's proposal to restructure the state's long-term care system, with a goal of increasing the number of people who can stay at home for long-term care. The legislation must be approved by the General Assembly.

Caregivers sound off on long-term care issues

   **Online:** Hear caregiver Sharron Watson talk about navigating Tennessee's long-term care system. See a video of a roundtable discussion on long-term care that Gov. Phil Bredesen led. Comment on this story.

By EMILY BREGEL

STAFF WRITER

For 15 years, Sharron Watson of Chattanooga devoted herself to the care of her aging parents, making calls to countless agencies and providers and researching all options to get them the care they needed.

Navigating the long-term care system by herself was exhausting, she said.

"I was at the end of my rope," she said.

As Tennessee Gov. Phil Bredesen listened and nodded, Ms. Watson said

she hopes the governor's long-term care reform efforts will make it easier for other caregivers.

"I had to learn the hard way," she said. "I can see that it's changing."

On Tuesday Gov. Bredesen led a roundtable discussion on long-term care at St. Barnabas Senior Living Services' new skilled nursing facility, listening to concerns from area

caregivers, social workers and providers of long-term care services.

The governor discussed his proposed Long-Term Care Community Choices Act, designed to encourage use of cost-effective alternatives to

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nursing home care and simplify access to the state's long-term care system.

"If you're old and sick, you shouldn't be forced to navigate a complex web of resources," he said.

At the meeting, about 35 people in gallery seating faced about 20 panelists. The panel included Chattanooga Mayor Ron Littlefield, Hamilton County Mayor Claude Ramsey, representatives from the TennCare Bureau, Alexian Brothers Community Services, the Southeast Tennessee Area Agency on Aging and Disability and the AARP.

A number of community members caring for elderly or disabled family members also were members of the panel.

During the discussion, the Rev. Ocie Fullilove of Chattanooga spoke about the challenges of some of the members of her church in dealing with aging.

"When they get a certain age, they are cast aside," she said.

Many in her church, she said, are afraid to speak up about the kinds of long-term care services they need for fear of putting a financial burden on their families.

Some panelists commented on the length of time it can take to be approved to receive home and community-based care, which can be covered through a waiver from TennCare, the state's managed Medicaid program.

That delay can force some who might have remained home with some assistance into a skilled nursing facility, panelists said.

The governor responded that his proposed legislation would speed up that approval process.

Gov. Bredesen pointed to Alexian Brother's PACE pro-



STAFF PHOTO BY DAN HENRY

Gov. Phil Bredesen talks Tuesday to St. Barnabas resident Mary Lottie Cox after speaking about the Long-Term Care Community Choices Act of 2008.

gram as a model of what Tennessee's entire long-term care system could achieve.

PACE, a managed care plan combining Medicare and TennCare funds, provides services such as adult day care, primary care and physical therapy, to Hamilton County residents over age 55 who meet the eligibility requirements for nursing home level care, said panelist Viston Taylor, president and chief executive officer of Alexian Brothers Community Services.

Chattanooga has the only PACE program in Tennessee, he said.

Ms. Watson said that PACE services allowed her to keep her mother at home after her father died.

"When my mother takes her last breath, I want her at my home, and PACE has allowed that," she said.

Eric Boston, president and CEO of St. Barnabas Senior Living Services, emphasized the nursing home's goal to rehabilitate patients and move them out of the nursing home into less-intensive care settings as soon as appropriate.

Forty-nine percent of new admissions to the nursing home at St. Barnabas have gone home,

he said.

St. Barnabas' assisted living apartments on Pine Street soon may gain approval to provide home and community-based care waiver services, such as assistance with meal preparation, housekeeping, dressing and bathing, both on-site and off-site, Mr. Boston said.

At the end of the meeting, while attendees were beginning to disperse, 80-year-old Mary Louise Maes of Chattanooga stood up and declared that in the 79 years she lived in Louisiana, she never met with the state's governor.

Ms. Maes, who moved here almost two years ago, said to the crowd, "You're so lucky to have a governor to come and speak to you like this."

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