

Nursing homes under scrutiny

Greater inspections more than double admissions suspensions across state

EDITOR'S NOTE: Audio with this story is available at www.timesfreepress.com.

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The number of admissions suspensions at state nursing homes in 2007 more than doubled from 2006, an increase facility administrators attribute to more aggressive inspections.

"It's really changed. I don't want to make an enemy of the Department of Health, but statistically there is a significant difference this year from prior years," said Jeff Ott, president and CEO of Alexian Village of Tennessee.

Tennessee Department of Health officials suspended admissions to 22 nursing homes in 2007, compared with 10 in 2006 and nine in 2005.

No nursing homes in Chattanooga had admissions suspended in 2007; two in Marion County did.

Also in 2007, five nursing homes lost their federal funding for reports of severe health and safety violations, ranging from fire safety code infractions to patient injuries.

More than 700 nursing home residents in Tennessee were displaced when reimbursement from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services was pulled, state records show.

In 2005 and 2006, one nursing home lost federal funding, according to the state.

In addition, civil monetary penalties against nursing homes, determined by CMS after complaint investigations is up five-fold.

ADMISSIONS SUSPENDED

The number of nursing homes whose admissions were suspended is growing:

- 2005: 9
- 2006: 10
- 2007: 23 (one nursing home received two suspensions)

Source: Tennessee Department of Health

In 2007, the penalties totaled \$10.9 million; in 2006, the figure was \$2 million, said Andrea Turner, spokeswoman for the state health department.

But state health officials argue that their inspectors are not any tougher on facilities.

"We've been working very hard through training and otherwise to ensure our inspections are being done consistently across the state," said Christy A. Allen, the new assistant commissioner for the Tennessee Department of Health's bureau of health licensure and regulation.

The number of complaints against nursing homes has risen, but the proportion substantiated by inspectors in 2007 was the same as the year before, about 20 percent, she said.

Hixson resident Bonnie Trotter said the focus on nursing home quality is appropriate.

"As far as I'm concerned, I don't know how (inspectors) can ever get too harsh, if you're thinking of your mom and dad being in there," said the retired Tennessee Valley Authority