

New regulations threaten the future of hospice care

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Ever since 1974, when Connecticut Hospice Care opened its doors and became the first such institution in America, our state has been a nationally recognized leader in hospice care. But proposed new standards may set us on a dangerous path -- one that threatens the high-quality delivery of this care here in Connecticut. Worse, it threatens to force terminally ill patients in our state to spend their last hours, days and weeks with unnecessary pain and without care.



Under the new standards proposed by the Department of Public Health, hospice patients who have days, maybe hours to live would not see a doctor for 24 hours, versus the immediate medical assessment provided today. In-patient facilities would no longer be required to have a physician and pharmacist on-site. And tragically, the mandatory ratio of nurses to patients would be dramatically reduced. Less staff and fewer services means less aid, including less pain and symptom management, for patients at the end of life. With these new regulations, many could die in fear and agony without adequate medical and spiritual support.

This is not the type of hospice care our state is known for and our families deserve. These new regulations would take us back to a time when our sick and dying were isolated in intensive care units, without the comfort of a human voice and without attention to changes in their medical needs. Our families, neighbors and friends deserve the support of dedicated hospice physicians, nurses, social service directors, clergy and volunteers operating as a team to help them and their families at the end of life.

Our current hospice program is a model around the world. More than 10,000 of our citizens receive hospice care each year in Connecticut. We have more than 30 organizations delivering hospice care to all areas in our state, 14 acute-care hospitals and 100 nursing homes providing in-patient hospice beds. No resident of our state is more than 30 minutes from a hospice facility.

The founders of hospice chose Connecticut more than 30 years ago to establish this holistic health discipline, and it has thrived here ever since. We should not tarnish their efforts and compromise this admirable record by relaxing our standards now, and thus diminishing hospice care in our state. I sincerely hope these regulations are withdrawn before they do harm. Let us work to keep Connecticut at the forefront of hospice care. And let us strive to see that all our friends, neighbors and loved ones can live out their final days in good care, without pain, and with standards these individuals and families so rightly deserve.

U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro represents Connecticut's Third District.