

Elder Abuse in Nursing Homes

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The late comedian Jerry Lewis once said old people are discarded like yesterday's garbage.

In congressional testimony at age 92, actor Mickey Rooney explained abusive treatment he received from his stepson, saying "(y)ou can't believe it's happening to you."

"You feel overwhelmed." He urged Congress to criminalize what's happening.

"I'm asking you to stop this elderly abuse," he urged. "I mean stop it now. Not tomorrow. Not next month, but now." Pass legislation saying "it's a crime, and we will not allow it in the United States of America."

Congress failed to act. Elder abuse is rampant. An earlier House Government Reform Committee study found nearly a third of US nursing homes cited for elder abuse – thousands of incidents nationwide over a two-year period alone.

Common problems include untreated bedsores, inadequate medical care, malnutrition, dehydration, preventable accidents, along with inadequate sanitation and hygiene – often jeopardizing the health, welfare and lives of elderly Americans, at times responsible for serious illnesses, injuries or deaths.

The avoidable deaths of eight elderly Hollywood, Florida nursing home residents during Hurricane Irma highlighted the problem – perishing needlessly in sweltering, instead of evacuating them to Memorial Regional Hospital across the street, a criminal act unlikely to be punished.

The Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills nursing facility was low-rated because of unsanitary conditions and poor food – besides negligent medical care when vitally needed as now revealed.

Victims ranged from age 71 to 99, perishing after the facility lost power, its management doing little or nothing to protect its residents, either with no plan in case of emergencies or failure to implement one.

They knew the risks to their residents, failed to act responsibly, leading to eight needless deaths, criminal negligence responsible.

Elders in nursing facilities need others to care for their needs, largely or wholly dependent on staff members. Otherwise they wouldn't be there – in end-of-life warehouses, a former US congressman once calling them “halfway houses between society and the cemetery.”

They'd become a multi-billion dollar industry, comprised of thousands of facilities nationwide, largely or inadequately regulated.

Care varies widely – from responsibly looking after residents to as little as possible, indifferent and abusive treatment, too often causing serious problems, including deaths from neglect.

Washington is largely indifferent, the Trump administration hostile to regulations. Around 70 – 80% of nursing home revenues come from Medicaid and Medicare, government with a direct stake in how they operate.

The Rehabilitation Center at Hollywood Hills has a disturbing history of healthcare fraud, abusive treatment and related violations. Yet Florida authorities let it continue operating.

The same problem exists nationwide, good facilities outnumbered by marginal and poorly operated others.

America's elderly and infirm deserve better. Federal, state and local authorities owe them the care they deserve – late in life, on their own inside facilities, dependent on others for care they're unable to provide for themselves.

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