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More oversight urged for nursing home voting

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For at least 20 years, Allegheny County election workers have visited Mayview State Hospital and the four Kane Regional Centers to help patients register and vote.

Advocates argue private nursing home residents -- especially those with dementia -- deserve the same attention.

Pennsylvania is one of 10 states without a mental competency requirement in its election laws, said Jennifer Mathis, a lawyer with the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law in Washington, D.C.

The mentally ill in Pennsylvania gained some protections three decades ago after several legal rulings and lobbying by a state civil rights committee. But more oversight is needed to ensure the voting rights of people in nursing homes to keep them from becoming disenfranchised and to prevent criminal activity, such as proxy voting and fraud, experts said.

"I can't put a number on how often that happens, but my hunch is that it's more than trivial," said Dr. Jason Karlawish, a University of Pennsylvania medical professor and associate director of the Penn Mental Center. "But even if it is trivial, it's unacceptable."

Officials often cite a lack of resources as the reason election workers don't visit private facilities.

"I don't think any county has the resources to go out to all of the homes they have," said Regis Young, director of the Butler County Election Bureau.

Nationwide, more than 2 million Americans live in nursing homes or assisted-care centers. A 2004 study said nearly two-thirds of those residents have some form of dementia, a progressive loss of memory and other mental functions. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia.

Allegheny County hires about 6,500 temporary workers each election, said Mark Wolosik, director of the Elections Bureau. In 2004, there were more than 650 registered voters at Mayview in Bridgeville and the four Kanes, voter registration records show.

Census figures from 2000 showed Allegheny County had the state's largest nursing-home population -- more than 11,000 residents.

"We have a difficult time getting people even to go to Mayview and Kane hospitals," Wolosik said.

Although he'd like election workers to visit private nursing homes, Wolosik said his office doesn't have the money.

Karlawish said the solution is easy: "If society values this, we'll get the resources."

Many states -- lobbied by advocates pushing for voting-right protections for older people with diminished cognitive abilities -- are struggling to determine if some people are too mentally challenged to vote.

People with court-ordered guardians because of mental illness, or who lack voting competency, are barred from voting in nearly 40 states. Experts say voting competency is impossible to measure.

"The bottom line is, people with mental disabilities shouldn't be held to a higher standard when it comes to voting," Mathis said.

Ingrid Tallarico, recreation director at St. Barnabas in Richland, has helped residents vote for eight years. She said employees ask residents if they'd like to vote and, for registration purposes, whether they are affiliated with a political party.


Tallarico said she would welcome help from county election officials.

"They would probably get more voters," she said.

In Australia, election workers use "mobile polling" units to visit hospitals, nursing homes and prisons to make it easier for people to vote.

A similar system should be used here, Karlawish said.

"If we really take elections seriously, we need to make sure resources are there for election workers to do their jobs," Karlawish said. "And that means making sure the elderly can vote."

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