

# UNITED SPINAL<sup>NOW</sup>

## New Biden Push On Homecare

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**T**wo years ago, our community was excited by newly-elected Pres. Biden's care giving agenda. You may remember that the President wanted to spend \$400 billion on Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS).

The goal was to keep people out of institutions and healthy in their homes. The proposal was drastically cut to \$150 billion by the House of Representatives, and then died altogether in the Senate. (Remember West Virginia Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin, who killed it in a closely-divided Senate?).

So where are we now? Good news. Pres. Biden included HCBS in his State of the Union address and called for a plan to reinforce community care options. It is well-documented that homecare is far cheaper than institutional care provided by Medicaid. Nevertheless, Medicaid relies on expensive – and many times unwanted – institutional care, i.e. nursing homes, when homecare is unavailable.

Biden's speech highlighted a point our community has been making for decades – people with disabilities want to receive care in their homes. So do seniors. Biden said, "Let's give more breathing room to millions of family caregivers looking after their loved ones. Pass my plan, so we get seniors and people with disabilities the homecare services they need and support the workers who are doing God's work."

Congress, despite looking completely inept since the session began in January, is talking about homecare. The Better Care, Better Jobs Act provides for a 10 percent increase in federal Medicaid assistance to states for HCBS.

People looking for homecare workers, private pay or Medicaid-funded, don't have to be told about the worker shortage or the reliance of the population United Spinal Association represents on those workers. Overwhelmingly, homecare workers are immigrants, some legal, some undocumented. Medicaid workers are paid by agencies and must have Social Security numbers.

Private pay homecare workers are hired by individuals and often paid cash. Since Medicare does not cover homecare, seniors pay privately, and this works for undocumented workers. However, these are poorly paying jobs without paid vacation or healthcare benefits. There is little opportunity to advance, and workers are isolated in patients' homes every day.

The COVID crisis demonstrated just how much people who use homecare need a better system. When workers couldn't show up, because they were exposed or sick, or their children's schools were closed, care recipients suffered greatly. Since most of the deaths have been in nursing homes, people with disabilities are rightfully afraid of having to be admitted because homecare workers are unavailable.

Baby boomers are quickly aging and becoming homecare recipients. No doubt, because seniors vote as a bloc, the Biden Administration will make this point to Congress, as the care agenda, Phase II, is unveiled. Remember what happened during the State of the Union address, when Republicans called the President a liar, because he said some of them want to cut Medicare and Social Security. It was true, but he got them to symbolically pledge not to cut the programs.

That's the approach the Administration must take to expanding HCBS opportunities. The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) is promoting a Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights, which we support. It is imperative that these workers receive adequate pay and benefits, as well as training opportunities to advance, if aging baby boomers and PWDs are to live successfully in the community.