

## Lawmakers examine senior-care issues

**Jochum points to a '\$60 million hole' in Iowa's Medicaid budget. A Stonehill employee says he is concerned about the lack of qualified direct-care workers.**

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Mike Burley

Iowa state Sen. Pam Jochum, D-Dubuque, talks Tuesday with seniors at Stonehill Care Center in Dubuque. Jochum and three fellow state lawmakers from the area came to Stonehill for a discussion on issues surrounding the senior-care industry.

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reasonable, he said.

"It has to be compensation that really applauds direct care as a valued profession, (making it) a career (people) want to stay in," Mancl said.

Jochum agreed, noting that about 70,000 people work in the industry statewide.

"What can we do to professionalize it, to have some educational requirements that everyone has to attain to get this job, and what can we do to improve the wages?" she asked. "When you're making 9 or 10 dollars an hour, you just can't make ends meet."

The meeting was one of Finkenauer's first as an elected official, having won the right to succeed Iowa Rep. Pat Murphy, D-Dubuque, in the Nov. 4 election. The conversation was enlightening, she said after the meeting.

"We really need to focus on the funding and making sure that our CNAs get paid what they deserve, get paid a living wage, and then also making sure that our facilities are taken care of," Finkenauer said.

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BY BEN JACOBSON [BEN.JACOBSON@THMEDIA.COM](mailto:BEN.JACOBSON@THMEDIA.COM)

Filling a Medicaid funding gap will be an early priority when area legislators return to Des Moines in January.

Several local elected officials met with about two dozen residents and staff of Stonehill Franciscan Services on Tuesday afternoon to discuss issues important to older Iowans.

Iowa Senate President Pam Jochum, D-Dubuque, was joined by Iowa Reps. Nancy Dunkel, D-Dyersville, and Chuck Isenhart, D-Dubuque, as well as Iowa Rep.-elect Abby Finkenauer, D-Dubuque.

Jochum said Iowa's relatively quick economic recovery means the state is expected to take on a greater burden of Medicaid costs. The state's federal matching rate is being reduced 1.49 percent to 64.65 percent during Fiscal Year 2016, meaning less federal money will come into the state.

Legislators failed to appropriate enough funds last year to shoulder that additional burden, Jochum said.

"Right now, we've got a \$60 million hole in our Medicaid budget, and we've got to take care of that," she said.

Isenhart noted that the Statehouse is controlled by Republicans, so his duties the next two years largely will be relegated to debating bills that come up.

"We really try to focus on as much making sure bad things don't happen as we do making good things happen," he said.

Fran Mancl, a certified nursing assistant and mentor at Stonehill, urged legislators to address the lack of qualified direct-care staff. Workers like Mancl account for about 80 percent of the "hands-on" care that residents of facilities like Stonehill receive.

Training for direct-care workers should be made a priority, as only about 40 percent of the workforce is certified, Mancl estimated. And pay has to be