

Health, Legislation

State Launches \$6M Grant Program Following Nurse's Murder

— Laura Arman, 8.5.2024



HARTFORD — Nearly a year after the murder of behavioral health nurse Joyce Grayson in Willimantic, the state is launching a grant program to provide home health care workers with in-depth training, emergency response buttons, a buddy escort system, tracking devices and phone lines for staff to call and report safety issues.

The program sets aside \$6 million in federal coronavirus funds, which will be available for home health care agencies.

Gov. Ned Lamont noted at a news conference on Monday that more people want to receive medical care at home, and view hospitals and nursing homes as a last resort. He identified home health care workers as critical to the future of the state's aging population.

"Home health care workers, they're going to now have a hotline, a help line they can press immediately if they feel at some risk," Lamont said. "We're going to have a GPS monitoring system; we're going to know where you are so we can respond accordingly. We're going to have some pre-analysis so we know the type of situation you're coming into, see if it's OK that you do that alone, or perhaps you need a buddy to escort you. [We'll] do everything we can within reason, to keep you safe."

Lawmakers underscored that the initiative — part of a **law passed** this spring — was in direct response to Grayson's **death**. The 63-year-old behavioral health nurse was killed on Oct. 28 during a scheduled home visit with a patient, Michael Reese, who is also a registered sex offender.

In April, Reese, 39, was arrested and **charged** with felony murder and attempted sexual assault against Grayson, whose body was found locked in a basement. Reese is currently being held on a \$2 million bond.

The aging population in Connecticut is expected to increase over time. Based on a **study**, the projected number of Connecticut residents aged 65 and older is expected to be more than 1 million by 2025, a 32% increase compared to 2010. By 2040, Connecticut is expecting a 30% increase in the number of long-term-care residents on Medicaid who will be staying in their homes.

The number of home health care aides is also increasing, and Lamont said they were trying to attract more through student loan forgiveness

and increased pay.

In 2021, there were 38,000 home health workers for the aging population and those with disabilities, nearly double the 2011 count of 21,000 workers, according to Lt. Gov. Susan Byciewicz. Of those, about a quarter are Hispanic women, and three in 10 are African American, according to State Sen. Saud Anwar, D-New Windsor.

“This is the reality. The home health workers — 65% of them have been exposed to verbal abuse. Forty-four percent physical abuse. Six percent sexual abuse,” Anwar said. “These are workers who go home to take care of individuals and have to endure this.”

State Sen. Martha Marx, D-New London, who works with the VNA of Southeastern Connecticut, said she has had to ask an escort to accompany her to a client’s home twice since December. She said things at her workplace have changed substantially.

“We have people actually doing safety assessments on our patients before we go out. Then when we call the client, we say who else will be there? Where should I park? Do you have a dog?” Marx said. “So you’d think that would just be common sense, but it just took the murder of Joyce Grayson to elevate it and make it [clear] that it really can happen and it can happen again.”

Marx said she’s unsure if having this law in place would have helped Grayson, since every situation is very different.

“I can tell you I’ve seen patients one day that are fine and the next day they’re not fine,” she said. “But if she had had that device where she could have pushed that button so that the whole neighborhood maybe could have heard that something was happening ... so I have to think that, yes, it would help her.”

Marx also said home health care aides often don't report abuse, noting that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration does not cover the home care industry.

"They're trying to change that in Washington; things are going slowly there," she said. "Since OSHA doesn't really have any guidance, we need to have the legislation here."

State Sen. Lisa Seminara, R-Avon, the ranking Republican on the Human Services Committee, also praised health care workers as "unacknowledged heroes."

"They are the dedicated, compassionate individuals that take care of our most vulnerable residents," she said. "They are the front line of care, offering emotional and physical support, enabling people to stay in their homes and to age in place, which is where everybody wants to be now, and those providing those services deserve to be safe."

In May, Elara Caring, the home-based care provider that Grayson worked for, was **fin**ed \$163,000 by the OSHA for not providing adequate safeguards to protect Grayson.

Application for the funding will available Aug. 7 and the bill will go into effect on Oct. 1.

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