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Congress May Cut Nursing Funding

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The front-line workers who care for nursing home patients are worried the next federal budget will mean longer days for staff and less care for residents.

Congress is considering cutting \$2.7 billion over five years in Medicare reimbursements that go to nursing homes and skilled nursing facilities. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services had recommended a 3.3 percent funding increase in the 2008 fiscal year to support nursing home quality improvement, according to the Coalition to Protect Senior Care.

Since 70 percent of nursing facility expenses are labor, staff will likely have to work longer hours and more shifts, which could affect quality of care, said Lisa Cantrell, president of the National Association of Health Care Assistants and a coalition leader. Cantrell was in Albuquerque Thursday to address a rally of nursing home and skilled nursing facility care-givers.

The association, based in Joplin, Mo., represents nursing assistants, who Cantrell said are the low-paid staffers who provide much of the daily care for nursing home residents.

"I know the Medicare system is stressed, but I don't understand how, when you walk down the hall and look at the patients, you can make these kinds of cuts," Cantrell said in an interview. She said the cuts Congress is considering would reduce Medicare payments to skilled nursing facilities to 1998 levels.

Funding cuts will make it harder to recruit nursing home staff just as nursing homes and skilled nursing facilities are improving care, Cantrell said.

"I've seen a huge improvement in quality of care in the 25 years I've been in the industry," she said. Cantrell began her career while in high school as a nursing assistant. She later became a nurse.