

The Unjust Silence: Why Are We Forgetting Our Most Vulnerable While Others Prosper?

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"In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." – Martin Luther King Jr.

In a year where prosperity is echoing through boardrooms and government halls, a deafening silence surrounds the economic plight of our most vulnerable citizens: nursing home residents on Medicaid (MassHealth). While CEOs celebrate nearly 10% pay raises, long-term care executives enjoy a 3.52% salary increase, state leaders receive hefty nearly 10% boosts, Massachusetts lawmakers secure an 11% raise for 2025, and retirees on Social Security and state pensions benefit from 3% and 2.5% Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs) respectively – a crucial lifeline against inflation – nursing home residents remain trapped in a financial time warp.

This is not just an oversight; it is a profound injustice that demands immediate correction!

For nearly two decades, the Personal Needs Allowance (PNA) for nursing home and rest home residents in Massachusetts has been cruelly stuck at a paltry \$72.80 per month. This isn't just stagnant; it's a regression in real terms. If inflation had been factored in since this amount was last set in 2007, the PNA should now be approximately \$113.42. This means that residents are effectively being penalized by a system that has allowed their spending power to erode by over 35%.

Consider the stark reality of this economic apartheid:

- A "Gravy Train" for Some, Scraps for Others: While those in positions of power and privilege enjoy significant boosts to their income, enabling them to maintain their quality of life in a rising economy, nursing home residents are left with a sum that defies logic. How can we, as a society that champions economic and social justice, stand by while the very people who built our communities are denied the most basic financial dignity?
- The Myth of "Covered Needs": The argument that "basic care, room, and board" are covered by Medicaid conveniently ignores the fundamental human need for personal choice, comfort, and connection. The PNA is meant to cover essential "life's necessities" not provided by the facility – things like:
 - Clothing and Shoes: Imagine being unable to replace worn-out shoes or purchase a new sweater as seasons change.
 - Toiletries beyond the bare minimum: The desire for a preferred shampoo, a specific lotion, or even a different brand of toothpaste is a small but significant aspect of personal comfort and identity.

- Haircuts and Grooming: Maintaining personal appearance contributes directly to self-esteem and mental well-being.
- Phone and Internet Access: In today's world, these are not luxuries; they are vital lifelines for staying connected with family, friends, and the outside world, preventing isolation and loneliness.
- Reading Materials, Snacks, and Small Pleasures: The ability to buy a magazine, a favorite candy bar, or a small gift for a grandchild offers moments of joy and normalcy.
- Massachusetts: The Irony of High Costs and Low Allowances: The situation is amplified in Massachusetts, which boasts the highest cost of living of any state in the continental United States. This means that the \$72.80 PNA stretches even less here than it would in other states with lower costs. Our most vulnerable residents are facing an ever-increasing financial squeeze, forced to make impossible choices between essential items.
- Obligated to Pay Almost All Income: Nursing home residents on Medicaid are often required to contribute almost all of their monthly Social Security and other income towards their basic care. This leaves the PNA as their sole discretionary fund. It's not a supplemental income; it's practically their entire allowance for anything beyond the bare institutional essentials.

The Moral and Economic Imperative:

This isn't about handouts; it's about respecting the inherent dignity of every individual, regardless of their living situation. It's about ensuring that those who rely on public assistance are not condemned to a life of perpetual deprivation.

- Economic Justice: If the economy is improving and various sectors are receiving raises and COLAs, it is morally indefensible to exclude nursing home residents from these benefits. Their needs are just as real, and their right to a dignified existence is just as valid.
- Social Equity: We must acknowledge the inherent ageism embedded in a policy that effectively punishes older adults for needing long-term care. This stagnant PNA contributes to a system where basic human rights are compromised.
- Improved Well-being: A sufficient PNA can directly contribute to improved mental and physical health outcomes by allowing residents to maintain personal hygiene, stay connected with loved ones, and engage in activities that bring them joy. This, in turn, can reduce healthcare costs associated with depression, isolation, and neglect.

It's time for legislative action. The continued neglect of the PNA is a stain on our collective conscience. We must demand that our elected officials, corporate leaders, and society at large recognize the glaring disparity and act decisively. Increase the Personal Needs Allowance to a level that reflects today's economic realities, with mandated annual cost-of-living adjustments. It's not just an economic policy; it's a fundamental statement about who we are as a society and how we value our elders. **Let us end the unjust silence and ensure that economic and social justice extends to all members of our community.**