Welcome to Iowa, the Care Less State

In Elkader, an Iowa family used a "hanny cam" to document negligent nursing home care. State inspectors saw the video and fined the home $500.

Nursing home residents are using cameras to make nagging problems public, while the residents themselves fight to use their own cameras to discourage abuse and neglect. The Register

My answer: It isn't, but it could be less.

The column highlighted an event where Iowa's Long Term Care Ombudsman's Office, the office charged with the responsibility to protect the health, safety and rights of Iowa residents in nursing homes, has lost sight of its original goal due to budget cuts, and it could no longer issue investigative complaints and advocate for residents and their families.

The news coverage sparked media attention across the state. Several print and television outlets commented on the cuts and made the case that action should be taken to get these ombudsmen back on the job to do the important work they are expected to do.

That hasn't happened. The ombudsmen are still beholden to their bosses. Older Iowans and their families with disabilities are being poorly treated and inappropriately served. To many Iowans, the state's decision to stop funding for the ombudsmen left the impression that it was a cost-cutting move and was done by a state that didn't care.

Many might not view the scale of positions in state government as less. But this IS bad news, and it should be debated by Iowans.

And why doesn't it? Because the independence that the office is supposed to have, the independence that is called for in federal law and regulations, doesn't exist.

If it did exist, the director of the office would be submitting a sounder budget proposal. The director would say, "Here's what we have and here's what we really need to do the job. Let's fund this and let's do it." That person would be publicly advocating for the resources requested, and explaining the implications of continuing to go along with what's already provided.

Sadly, the independence of the office is an illusion. The reality is that the director of the office expects through a share of the Governor's budget that leads to the Governor. If the Governor wants state agency directors to submit budget proposals that maintain the status quo, that's what they do. To do otherwise would be to risk an end to a job.

Bottom line - Iowans deserve better from the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman. Aging Iowans and Iowans with disabilities are nursing facilities deserve to be well served, not minimally served.

I ask two things of elected leaders:

- Fund the nursing homes to get the right ombudsmen back on the job. The state has money. It found millions for Apple to locate here. It finds millions for bailed-out banks to pay damages from lawsuits. It can find the approximately $60,000 needed to fund these costs.
- Propose a budget submitted by the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman. Rather than looking at what's being asked for by Ombudsman's wanted. Fund the office at a level that allows it to serve the way they desire to be served.

And we're not alone. There are many others like them. If your care continues to be placed primarily on cutting taxes, then the result will be that we'll live in a state that is the cheapest, not the greatest.

Jane Ramey has lived in the state most of her life. She has lived in 47 states, and she believes that Iowa is a great place to live.