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Three-quarters of Pa.'s personal-care homes have expired licenses

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HARRISBURG, Pa. -- Three-quarters of Pennsylvania's personal-care homes have expired licenses because of a state inspection backlog, according to figures released by the state Public Welfare Department late Wednesday.

Department spokeswoman Stacey Ward said that 1,190 of 1,589 personal-care homes are operating with expired licenses, and the agency is moving to close 30 homes because of safety concerns.

It could take until year's end to complete inspections, Public Welfare Secretary Estelle Richman told a Senate panel earlier in the day.

"I believe we're about six months behind (on inspections), but catching up," Richman told the lawmakers.

At the hearing, Richman said she did not know exactly how many homes had expired licenses. But the department provided the total to The Associated Press later in the day.

Corey Rowley, executive director of the Pennsylvania Statewide Independent Living Council, an advocacy group, called the number of homes with expired licenses "shocking." Rowley said she hoped Richman would aggressively attack the problem with the help of new regulations that took effect in 2005.

"We worry for the people that live in personal-care homes," Rowley said. "We hope that process (of enforcing the regulations) can happen sooner rather than later."

Richman was questioned closely by Sen. Patricia Vance, R-Cumberland, about the department's monitoring of personal-care homes during Richman's confirmation hearing before the Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee. The committee voted unanimously to forward her nomination to the full Senate.

Vance said licenses expired more than 10 months ago for at least two homes in her district. One of those homes had received a letter from the department saying that, as a result of the delayed inspections, the letter was "verification of continued lawful operation," Vance said.

"What happens if there's a tragedy in that home?" Vance asked. "What do we tell the families of the people who are there?"

Richman responded that "it is the responsibility of the Department of Public Welfare to make sure things happen on time, and if we can't do that, then the secretary is the one responsible."

"That's fine that you're willing to assume that responsibility, but that gives little comfort to the people knowing that you're not inspecting these houses," Vance said.

The department licenses personal-care homes for elderly and disabled people who need help with basic tasks such as bathing, dressing and managing their personal finances. The homes, which serve 50,700 residents, are sometimes advertised as "assisted-living residences," "boarding homes" or "retirement homes."

Unlike nursing homes, which the state Health Department licenses, personal-care homes do not provide 24-hour medical care.

Last month, The Philadelphia Inquirer reported that it identified at least 55 deaths of personal-care home residents in the last seven years that raised questions about the facilities' quality of care.

Advocates for residents have complained that the Public Welfare Department does not employ enough inspectors to monitor the homes. The department currently has 32 inspectors.

During Wednesday's hearing, Richman said the department's budget request for the 2007-08 fiscal year called for hiring at least 10 additional inspectors. Richman said she believed that would be sufficient to address the inspection backlog, but Vance was skeptical.

"You think 10 is enough?" Vance said.

"I think 10 is enough," Richman responded.

Ward later said that the department is trying to add the new hires "as quickly as possible" to address the backlog.

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