

RV tour promotes eldercare in state



Scott Proctor stands in front his CARE RV in Del City on Thursday. He's using it to tour the state to promote eldercare.

PHOTO BY STEVE GOOCH, THE OKLAHOMAN

BY VALLERY BROWN

Staff Writer
vbrown@opubco.com

Touring the state in a brightly decorated RV, a former nursing home owner is spreading the message that those care facilities are closing down and lawmakers must make funding care for the elderly a priority.

"This is a serious situation," said Scott Proctor, who closed his nursing home in Jefferson County last year. "Long-term care is extremely underfunded, and we have make people aware of this."

The tour is organized by the Coalition of Advocates for Responsible Eldercare, an advocacy group for long-term care in the state.

Proctor will make 20 stops in the six weeks he spends traveling the state in the recreational vehicle. He's gathering signatures to bring to lawmakers asking for no further cuts to long-term care and nursing homes. A map on the side of the RV shows sites across the state where

nursing homes are closing, have gone bankrupt or are on the verge of shutting down.

Since 2000, nearly 120 nursing homes have closed statewide, according to state Health Department records. In Oklahoma County, about 20 have closed in recent years.

Nursing home owners and administrators say much of this is due to state funding cuts.

Family-owned and rural nursing homes are the hardest hit in many cases, Proctor said. When a home closes, jobs leave a community, and the elderly are forced to relocate. In Proctor's case, many of his residents were moved more than 60 miles away to other facilities.

"They lose their homes and their families. And many times, we are their only family," Proctor said.

Average nursing home costs are more than \$146 a day for each patient. The reimbursement reduction last year made that less than \$126 per day. Threats of more cuts loom.

"I challenge any busi-

ness to try and operate at that rate," said Diane Struttman, administrator of Grace Living Center in Del City.

House Minority Leader Scott Inman, D-Del City, said lawmakers are obligated to balance the state's budget.

"But we're leaving federal dollars on the table because we're not making this a priority," he said.

The Oklahoma Health Care Authority pays claims to doctors, hospitals and nursing homes for people enrolled in Medicaid or Medicare. Last year, the board approved a 3.25 percent decrease in reimbursement rates for providers as a result of budget cuts across state agencies. Cuts to the agency's budget meant federal matching dollars were lost.

As the oldest members of the baby boomer generation hit their mid-60s and the country's elderly population increases, Proctor questions where they will go.

"The public needs to be aware," he said. "At some point this affects all of us."