

# The Post-Standard

## Nursing home plight discussed

### System "is crushing under its own weight," man picked to find homes to close says.

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Staff writer

The head of a state commission looking to shut down hospitals and nursing homes said Thursday night health care providers in Central New York should not view his group as a threat.

David Sandman, executive director of the Commission on Health Care Facilities in the 21st Century, said the real threat is too many empty beds, soaring Medicaid costs, hospitals and nursing homes that are financially bleeding to death and a rising tide of residents without health insurance.

"The commission may be the best chance we have of saving a system that is crushing under its own weight," Sandman said at a meeting of the Central New York Health Systems Agency. About 60 people, many of them hospital and nursing home administrators, attended the meeting at Hospice of Central New York in Salina.

The governor and the Legislature created the commission to identify hospitals and nursing homes around the state that are candidates for closure, consolidation or conversion. The commission already has identified Oswego and Cayuga as two counties with too many nursing home beds. It views both counties as having high potential for nursing home closures.

The commission will make its final recommendations by Dec. 1. Unless the Legislature rejects the recommendations, they will be-

come law. In creating the commission, the governor and the Legislature gave the group "extraordinary power," Sandman said.

"It's not a paper tiger," he said. "The commission is about real change."

Sandman talked mostly about what's ailing the state's health care system. He offered the following diagnosis:

The occupancy rate of state hospitals is 60 percent to 65 percent and should be closer to 85 percent. Many hospitals are engaged in a "medical arms race" because they can make more money providing expensive high-tech services.

The number of people on Medicaid has grown by one-third since 2000. That program, which provides care for the poor, the elderly and the disabled, accounts for 25 percent of state spending and cannot be sustained. Meanwhile, the number of empty nursing home beds has soared by 5,000 since 1994. The demand for nursing home beds is not expected to grow for another 20 years. About 14 percent of nursing home residents could be living in other facilities.

In addition to occupancy rates, the commission will look at admission rates, length of patient stay, feedback from around the state and other data, Sandman said.

"It's not just a numbers game," Sandman said.