

Champion of older Americans chosen as Mass elder affairs secretary

By **Kay Lazar** *GLOBE STAFF APRIL 16, 2015*

A Northeastern University associate professor well known nationally and in Massachusetts for her work with older Americans was chosen Thursday as the state's new Secretary of Elder Affairs.

Alice Bonner, who previously directed the nursing home division for the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services in the Obama administration, will start her new position June 1, according to a news release from the Baker administration.

"The fastest growing segment of the population includes those age 85 and older. It is critical we have a strong leader who will listen to and meet the needs of these and all older adults and their caregivers," Marylou Sudders, state health secretary, said in a statement.

"Dr. Bonner's deep commitment, particularly around affordable housing, transportation, nutrition services and dementia care are vital to ensuring choice and autonomy for older adults," Sudders said.

Before joining the Obama administration in January 2011, Bonner, a registered nurse, directed the Massachusetts Bureau of Health Care Safety and Quality, which oversees nursing homes. During that time, she championed a push to lower the use of powerful antipsychotic drugs in nursing homes, particularly for seniors with dementia who are vulnerable to dangerous side effects from the medication. Bonner continued that campaign in the Obama administration.

"I am extremely grateful to Governor Baker and Secretary Sudders for the opportunity to work with them to promote [Elder Affairs'] mission: to ensure the independence and wellbeing of older adults, their families and caregivers," Bonner said in a statement. "I look forward to hearing from the individuals [the agency] serves including those living at home, in senior housing, assisted living, nursing homes and other settings, as well as people in state government, our stakeholders and partners."

Elder advocates said they were excited by the selection of Bonner.

"She is a real professional who understands the substance of the work," said Mike Festa, director of AARP Massachusetts, who served as state elder affairs secretary from Oct 2007 to the spring

of 2009. “When you are sitting down working with her, she is sensible, bright, and thoughtful in the way she engages with people.”

Al Norman, executive director of Mass Home Care, a network of nonprofit agencies focused on home-based care, said Bonner’s extensive experience should allow her to “hit the ground immediately,” bringing an injection of new ideas.

“For years, long term care has been the poor step child of the health care system, and I think Alice Bonner understands there needs to be an equal partnership between health care and the world of long term supports” for older residents, Norman said.

People over the age of 60 make up 20 percent of the population in Massachusetts, according to the state’s news release. With baby-boomers aging, that number will jump to 26 percent by 2030, it stated.