

Proponent Testimony for Ohio HB 770 prepared by Mindy M. Walker
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Chairman Ginter, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking member Howse, and members of the House Aging and Long-Term Care Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to submit proponent testimony on HB 770 to advance the need to grant Compassionate Caregiver status to provide support to family members and loved ones residing in long-term care facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and national public health crisis. **My testimony is directed at the importance of the Essential or Compassionate Caregiver to the senior care resident, the staff of the care community, and the family and friends of loved ones living in senior care communities. I offer comments from my direct experience as a designated Essential Caregiver since mid-July, 2020, in an Ohio senior community that has worked to sustain these visits safely and successfully.**

Although my family anticipated the closure to visitors of senior care communities, when the call came on Saturday, March 14, 2020, the two worst fears that I and my sister held were: (1) that COVID-19 would strike in our father's Ohio Assisted Living community and in the adjoining Memory Way community; and (2) that Dad would suffer from isolation and this would adversely affect his mental health. On concern number one, our fears were allayed as we saw the safe results of a well-planned, carefully managed, and caring approach to the closure to outside visitors. There were – and have not been – any COVID-19 outbreaks or deaths inside my Dad's community resulting from the virus.

However, on concern number two, as the months passed through the spring into summer, we saw our Dad decline during the period of being removed from his family and the outside world. In mid-July when I learned that a designated Essential Caregiver status was available on a case-by-case basis, I appealed to the Executive Director of his community. I was granted the ability to come inside to give assistance and companionship to Dad inside his apartment. While window visits had been helpful, the ability to experience his physical and mental state more directly, as well as the condition of his surroundings, was once again possible. I was able to immediately address concerns with staff and bring attention to necessary needs and changes for Dad.

Another benefit of my Essential Caregiver status was reconnecting with staff and again seeing residents in the community that my family had come to know and love. More than one staff member said to me that “We’re so glad to see you and other family members back inside. It helps us all so much.” **So, I submit that the presence of Essential – now Compassionate – Caregivers also supports the staff that are committed to keeping our loved ones safe and loved. In addition, the presence of familiar faces helps to boost and brighten anyone’s day.**

This is an appropriate place to include my experience with the transparency of the community, as designed and conveyed through the Executive Director with all families and residents throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. From the beginning of the COVID-19 health crisis, family members have received regular updates via email, regular Zoom sessions, and an open line of communication. As early as March 4, 2020, before the Governor began issuing the cascading orders, the Executive Director and management staff held an in-person “State of the Union” style presentation for all residents and family members. The community’s plans for COVID-19 were presented and detailed in a way that gave us confidence that they were prepared in the event of a public health emergency. Of course, on that date no one could have known that we were a week from immediate and life altering changes. I came to appreciate that friends and other family members here in Ohio and across the country experiencing various scenarios with loved ones in senior care were not afforded the same transparency of action and implementation. **In short, communication and transparency between senior community leaders and loved ones is a key to success for peace of mind and ultimate sustainability.**

When the Governor announced the order effective October 12, 2020 that outdoor visits would cease and facilities and communities needed a plan for how to proceed within the guidelines for indoor visits, my Dad’s community was ready. After an Executive Director Zoom session, we knew what was in place and expected. As an Essential Caregiver, I would now become a Compassionate Caregiver. Other family members and loved ones were able to schedule a half hour visit.

With onsite testing every other week and a negative result, I can go inside my Dad’s apartment for one hour as many as two or three times per week, as needed. This policy continues, except for the immediate (and extended) closure to visitors on November 27, 2020 due to the high evidence of community spread of COVID in the county where my father resides. Currently, regular Friday Zoom updates from the Executive Director keep family

members and loved ones informed about plans and directions going forward. As always, questions can be submitted in advance, or posed during the live Zoom question and answer period.

I end my written testimony on a positive note, recognizing that every senior care community is different and, in fact, that every community in Ohio is different. My father resides where family members were permitted to enter and visit in person from an early stage in the pandemic, adhering to mandated Ohio Department of Health precautions and CDC guidelines.

Communication from management and staff are key. **Transparency fosters confidence and support from loved ones. There is a safe way to see and support our loved ones living in senior care facilities. Further, the generalized term of Nursing Home is not adequate to describe all senior living environments.**

Passing HB700 begins to lay a foundation for family members and loved ones to effectively visit and support family members in need and suffering from the isolating COVID-19 restrictions. As we look forward to vaccinations and securing our senior population, we still face several more months of isolation and separation from our loved ones. We logically look to our elected officials for guidance and solutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute this written testimony for the record. My hope is that Ohio legislators will consider HB770 a priority as they conclude this legislative session. Millions of Ohioans are directly affected by this issue and would immediately benefit from moving this bill forward.

Thank you,

Mindy M. Walker