



## **House Health Committee**

### **House Bill 120**

**March 9, 2021**

### **Testimony of Mark Knepper General Manager VITAS Healthcare®**

My name is Mark Knepper, General Manager for VITAS Healthcare. I also sit before you as a licensed nursing home administrator, Board Member of the Ohio Healthcare Association and a healthcare professional with 33 years of experience.

VITAS Healthcare® (pronounced VEE-tahs), supports HB 120 that would permit caregivers, especially hospice staff, to enter long-term care facilities to provide its expertise in pain management and palliative care to a facility resident during the COVID-19 state of emergency. Thank you Representative Richardson and Fraizer for sponsoring this important legislation.

We understand that nursing home populations are at the highest risk of being affected by the coronavirus so we continually work with our partners in nursing homes and assisted living facilities to ensure the safety of their patients and staff. As part of this advocacy, we ensure our clinicians follow adequate hand hygiene and adhere to facility screening procedures, COVID-19 testing protocols, PPE use as well as working with facility leadership to incorporate CDC, CMS and Ohio Department of Health guidance.

Despite all these efforts many assisted living and nursing homes are still not allowing hospice personnel access to our patients during this pandemic. These numbers constantly change depending on what outbreaks may occur within their centers

While facilities can establish their own guidelines on restricted visitation, hospice providers are a key part of the senior care health team. We work in collaboration to enhance quality of life in the final days and months of life and are needed to continue to provide the holistic support to our residents and their families.

As the coronavirus pandemic surges again, hospices and nursing homes need to continue a collaborative partnership to provide terminally-ill patients with high quality end-of-life care. The result of these restricts have been fewer nursing home residents accessing the hospice benefit prior to death. Now more than ever does these providers need our support. Our nursing home and

assisted living partners are stretched and stressed as they need to use supplemental labor due to the burden of caring for COVID patients with many staff leaving this sector.

Because of these operational challenges, many patients are left with a lack of socialization as well as the necessary care required to deal with their fragile health care state. We are seeing patients decline more quickly needing the types of services we offer. We are experts when dealing with respiratory issues as well as pain and other areas that can help mitigate the decline many of these patients are experiences with or without COVID. We also offer that additional socialization that is required and now not being provided at many levels. With these challenges, when patients sometimes are deemed appropriate for our services, they pass within days of our becoming involved in our care.

VITAS has been a pioneer and leader in the hospice movement since 1978. VITAS operates hospice programs in 15 states and the District of Columbia; employing nearly 13,051 professionals who care for terminally ill patients daily, primarily in the patients' homes and also in our Inpatient Hospice Units, in hospitals, nursing homes and assisted living communities/residential care facilities for the elderly. As a certified hospice program, we operate under Medicare's Conditions of Participation (CoP) for Hospice, 42 C.F.R. § 418 et. seq. ("CoPs") and are licensed as hospice agency in the State of Ohio.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments. You can contact me with any questions or comments at (614) 822-2700 or [mark.knepper@vitas.com](mailto:mark.knepper@vitas.com).