

Proponent Testimony for Ohio HB 120 prepared by Mindy M. Walker
134rd General Assembly 2021-2022
March 30, 2022

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, and Ranking Member Antonio: Thank you for the opportunity to submit proponent testimony on HB120 to support passage of the Compassionate Caregivers Act and the need to codify Compassionate Caregiver status to provide support to family members and loved ones residing in senior care facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and future environmental threats. Taking this action now will ensure the State public health measures required to contain and establish visiting guidelines as we become a more fully vaccinated society during the weeks and years to come. 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 from mid-July, 2020 through October, 2021, in an Ohio senior community that worked to safely and successfully sustain these visits.

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 and the fall and winter of 2020, we saw our Dad decline during this 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 Care 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 their needs met. In addition, the presence of familiar faces helps to boost and brighten anyone’s day. Finally, the ability of Essential Caregivers to be inside the senior community ensures that loved ones’ day-to-day personal and social needs are taken care of during what has become a continued shortage of STNAs, LPNs, RNs and housekeeping staff as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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 – now one year into the pandemic – and 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 permanent 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 between senior community leaders and loved ones remains key to success for peace of mind and ultimate success of sustaining safe and supportive visits and interaction with our loved ones in senior living communities.

Many seniors that began the pandemic in an Independent Living apartment have declined and advanced during the past year to the point of needing Assisted Living or Memory Care accommodations. This has been the direct result of separation and isolation from families and friends during the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, along with the inability of family members to engage with and directly help within the senior living communities. I urge the Ohio Legislature to codify the need for families to remain continuously in contact with senior loved ones and support the need for every Ohio facility to have access to critical supplies and best practice models that can sustain open and normal lives for all concerned, regardless of environmental and outside physical or medical threats.

As a family, we were fortunate that 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 half hour visits. With onsite testing every other week and a negative result, I was able to visit my Dad's apartment for one hour as many as two or three times per week, as needed. This policy evolved over time to meet the

changing environmental factors brought about the Delta and Omicron COVID-19 surges that lasted through February 2022.

This process evolved over the months to incorporate fully vaccinated seniors and family members, along with the availability of more efficient COVID-19 rapid testing. Over the months, loved ones were able to engage in activities outside of the senior the living community, depending on the status of community spread and infection rates in their county. As of March 30, 2022, my Dad's community has now returned to a new normal of visits, which does require family members and other visitors to wear masks while inside the buildings and self-monitor for the COVID-19 symptoms.

I end my written testimony on a positive note, recognizing that every senior care community in Ohio is different. But it is time that resource and financial differences among communities no longer mean that seniors and families continue to suffer. My father is fortunate to live in a community where family members were permitted to enter and visit in person from an early stage in the pandemic, adhering to mandated precautions and CDC guidelines. Communication from management and staff were and remain key to success. **Transparency fostered confidence and support from loved ones.**

There is a safe way to see and support our loved ones living in senior care facilities. However, this does not come without the State Legislature both helping make essential supplies and resources available to all senior living facilities while and putting into the Ohio Revised Code the guidance that both sustains support for our senior loved ones, and removes ambiguity for lawmakers, community management and family members.

Passing HB120 will eliminate the discrimination and differentiation for family members and loved ones to effectively visit and support family members in need and suffering from COVID 19 or future environmental restrictions. As we look forward with vaccinations that continue to secure our senior

population, we still face vigilance and caution to keep our loved ones safe from COVID-19 and other threats yet unknown. However, many lessons have been learned and models for success are available. It's time that we prioritize equality of results for ALL seniors, regardless of where they reside or what resources they or their families may have to secure the best life for those who sacrificed so much to give us the opportunity to live our best lives. We logically look to our elected officials for guidance and solutions. This should no longer be a question for debate. After two years of lives turned upside down by a global pandemic, all Ohio families have sacrificed, suffered loss, and paid a high price. Now is the time to learn from our experiences and assure that every Ohio citizen will be afforded the same chance at living their best life. Passing HB120 is one way to ensure this future.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute this written testimony for the record. My hope is that Ohio legislators will consider passage of HB120. Millions of Ohioans are directly affected by this issue and would immediately benefit from its successful implementation.

Thank you,

Mindy M. Walker