

Good afternoon, Chair White, Vice-Chair Salvo and Ranking Member Lett, and members of the committee.

My name is William Arfaras, and I serve as the Chief Operations Officer and Administrator of Akeso Home Hospice which is a subset of Akeso Health Care, a family-run organization that has been delivering compassionate care to our community for over 30 years. I am here to speak in support of two important measures:

1. Increasing Medicaid reimbursement for hospice room and board to 100%
2. Implementing the SilverSkills workforce development program

Both of these proposals are essential for improving healthcare outcomes, ensuring fairness for providers, and maintaining high-quality care in our state.

Right now, skilled nursing facilities (SNFs) only receive 95% of their Medicaid rate when a Medicaid patient elects hospice. From our experience at Akeso Home Hospice, we have seen firsthand that this is a major financial burden for SNFs already operating on razor-thin margins. In many instances, SNFs feel pressured to make difficult business decisions:

1. **Provide comfort measures themselves** without incorporating the specialized expertise of a dedicated hospice team.
2. **Require hospice agencies to cover the missing 5%**, forcing providers like ours to absorb the loss from budgets that would otherwise go toward staff training, retention, and continuous quality improvement.

Neither option is in the best interest of the patient, and we have personally witnessed how these financial pressures can compromise the overall quality of end-of-life care. When hospice professionals are excluded, patients and their families lose the benefit of a uniquely holistic support model, which includes expert pain management, around-the-clock symptom control, and extensive emotional and spiritual guidance. Our Staff, for example, provides an extra layer of care in SNFs—spending quality time by sitting with patients, listening to their stories, and ensuring their favorite activities and foods are incorporated into our visits. Families often express profound relief when they receive not only clinical support but also genuine companionship and education about what to expect in a loved one's final days.

Conversely, when hospices must absorb the 5% shortfall, it directly affects our ability to invest in staff development, team expansion, and essential community outreach. In this highly competitive healthcare labor market, hospitals and skilled nursing facilities—already supported by programs that enhance their workforce funding and whose services are reimbursed at higher rates—can offer higher wages, making it more difficult for hospice providers to recruit and retain top talent.

It is also crucial to note the significant cost savings that hospice brings to the healthcare system. Our nurses regularly review and de-prescribe unnecessary medications, reducing pharmacy costs and preventing potential medication-related complications. Fully reimbursing hospices for room and board at 100% will help us maintain and expand these cost-effective, patient-centered services.

I also want to express strong support for SilverSkills, a proposed workforce development program that would reimburse aging service providers for the costs of training and credentialing direct care workers. End-of-life care requires a highly skilled and empathetic workforce, from nurses and social workers to chaplains and aides. Through SilverSkills, agencies like ours can more readily support new hires and further develop current staff, ensuring that we have enough well-trained professionals to meet the needs of the patients in our community.

At Akeso Home Hospice, we are fortunate to have a long-tenured team. However, expanding our staff to meet rising demand has been challenging. We have spent tens of thousands a year on recruitment efforts alone, yet many qualified candidates ultimately choose employers who can offer higher wages—often because of stronger funding streams or other workforce incentive programs like SilverSkills. SilverSkills would help level the playing field by providing reimbursements that offset training expenses, allowing hospice agencies to remain competitive employers and continue delivering excellent care to those who need it most.

Together, 100% Medicaid reimbursement for hospice room and board and the SilverSkills workforce program promise a more sustainable model of care for Ohio's terminally ill individuals and their families. In summary steps would:

- Ensure skilled nursing facilities contract with the best hospice choice without forfeiting critical revenue or only working with hospices willing to reduce their budgets and growth.
- Allow hospice agencies to maintain financial stability, invest in robust staff training, and extend services to more communities.
- Empower patients and families to experience the holistic benefits of hospice—including improved symptom management, emotional support, and genuine companionship in life's most challenging moments.
- Create a stronger, more resilient healthcare workforce through targeted investments in recruitment, ongoing education, and retention.

In closing, I ask you to support these measures and help Ohio lead the way in delivering dignified, compassionate care for our aging and terminally ill population. Thank you for your time, and I welcome any questions you may have.