



House Bill 770

December 9, 2020

**Testimony of
Mark Knepper, General Manager &
Dr. Joette Greenstein, Medical Director**

VITAS Healthcare®

Good morning Chairman Ginter, Vice Chairman Swearingen, Ranking Member Howse, and distinguished members of the House Aging and Long Term Care Committee. My name is Mark Knepper, General Manager for VITAS Healthcare. I also sit before you as a licensed nursing home administrator, a member of the Ohio Council for Home Care and Hospice, and a healthcare professional with 33 years of experience. I would also like to introduce Dr. Joette Greenstein our Medical Director who will also provide testimony as a medical practitioner on our behalf.

VITAS Healthcare® (pronounced VEE-tahs) supports HB 770 and the amendment that would permit caregivers, especially hospice staff “who are essential”, the ability to enter long-term care and assisted living 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 healthcare 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 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 restrictions have been fewer nursing home residents accessing the hospice benefit prior to death. Now more than ever do 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 necessary care required to deal with their fragile state. We are seeing patients decline rapidly in need of the type of holistic care we offer. As palliative care experts for patients with respiratory issues, we help mitigate decline for patients with or without COVID-19. We also offer much needed socialization that is essential for their wellbeing. When patient referrals are made from the communities and are deemed appropriate for our services, they are passing within days on our care because they are not identified earlier with having limited or no access to these communities. We ask for the bill sponsor to include an emergency clause regarding this bill as every day no action is taken more lives are put at risk.

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.