

Thank you Mr. Chairman

I feel a very real sense of honor and privilege sitting in this chamber today addressing this august body, and would like to personally thank Representative Richardson for inviting me here to share my testimony.

As a first time witness before this house and as someone who makes his living as a writer, when I was first asked by Representative Richardson to testify in support of HB 770, I quickly agreed and then immediately went about composing not just a statement, but a "STATEMENT". I was going to be eloquent, impressive, knowledgeable, commanding. I wanted to knock you out with my brilliance and elocution, to be that guy who really brought his 'A' game that day when he came to testify.

But the subject of HB 770 that we are discussing here today does not lend itself to eloquence, nor subtlety, nor nuance.

After living in an assisted living facility for over a year, my mother was transferred to an Alzheimer's unit at Green Hills Community in West Liberty. She was moved as she became gradually more forgetful and unsteady on her feet, but was still well enough physically to attend a high school football game and not one, but two Christmas parties last December. She continued to receive visitors almost on a daily basis right up until the governor banned all visitors to long-term care facilities in March because of the Covid pandemic.

This was the beginning of the end for my mom. She lost her last connection to the outside world and had her final, quickly-fading memories stolen from her, all with a stroke of a pen. My siblings and I kept frequent tabs on her by telephone with both her, when she was able, and with the staff. But the lack of stimulation, affection and love sucked the life right out of her. She quit eating. She refused to move. She became disheveled, which had you known Ma, was completely out of character. The next to the last time I saw her, she sitting up in a wheelchair. An aide had moved her near some glass double doors so we would wave at one another. Ma didn't understand why we had to be separated and the encounter was torture for both of us. The next time I saw my mother about six weeks later and it was the last time. She was on her death bed in a Covid-segregated section of Green Hills. She died two days later, never saying another word. My siblings and I are completely convinced that our lack of contact with our mother shortened her life by at least a year. She didn't die from Covid; she died from the cure.

Alzheimer's is a monstrous, brutal thing to witness first hand, but Ma's memory loss may have been a small blessing in the end, because there are tens of thousands of residents in LTC facilities in their state right now who suffer only physical ailments, residents whose memories and wits are fully functional. Shutting down the lock-down units had terrible outcomes; in LTC beds that are filled with lucid, cognizant, intelligent people, the effect is devastating.

Enforced isolation, for any human being, is a form of mistreatment. The Committee will remember Sen. John McCain, who spent over five years in captivity in after being shot down over North Vietnam. Lieutenant Commander McCain was frequently isolated from all human contact as a very effective form of punishment. When McCain returned as a U.S. Senator to Vietnam 30 years later, he was shown one of the cells where he spent a good part of his captivity. He was asked if he wanted to step inside. He refused. Isolation torture continued to to have a powerful effect on an extremely brave man thirty years after the fact. It's not hard to imagine the effect isolation is having on the residents of our retirement communities, LTC facilities and nursing homes across the state.

The only thing HB 770 lends itself to is a discussion of humanity, indeed our humanity when dealing with those of our family, friends or neighbors who can no longer take care of themselves. For formerly independent people who spent years taking care of themselves and others, moving into a long-term care facility or the like can be devastating experience, but its a blow that can be lessened with the help of loved ones who visit regularly, bring by a box of cookies or play a game or two of cribbage. It gives residents both something to look forward to and a connection to the world outside.

We understood when the retirement and nursing home were closed to visitors at the beginning of the pandemic. We knew then just how little we knew about the virus and shutting the facilities down was the prudent thing to do. But to keep them closed to visitors at this late date is akin farce. We as families know now how to protect our family and friends who are confined from getting the virus. We know that the nursing homes, LTC's and retirement homes know how to protect our family and friends who are confined. It is we – family, friends, nursing staffs, medical staffs, environmental staffs – who should be making the decisions about allowing visitors to the wards.

To that end, it is imperative that HB 770 not only make it out of committee, but to the floor, then to the Senate, then to the Governor's desk, where it should be immediately signed. Anything less than a speedy enactment of this bill will only prolong the suffering that only separated families can feel.