



## **House Health Committee**

### **House Bill 120**

**March 30, 2022**

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

Good afternoon Senate Health Committee and Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, and Ranking Member Antonio.

My name is Mark Knepper, General Manager for VITAS Healthcare. I also sit before you as a licensed nursing home administrator, I am also actively involved in both hospice associations in Board Member positions or on various health committees 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 understood during the pandemic that nursing home populations were 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 ensured that our clinicians follow adequate hand hygiene and adhere to facility screening procedures, COVID-19 testing protocols, PPE use as well as worked with facility leadership to incorporate CDC, CMS and Ohio Department of Health guidance throughout the pandemic.

Despite all these efforts that were made with assisted living and nursing homes they were still not allowing hospice personnel access to our patients during the pandemic. These numbers were constantly changing depending on what outbreaks occurred 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.

The result of these restrictions during the pandemic had impacted fewer nursing home residents accessing the hospice benefit prior to death. Now more than ever did these providers need our support with help prior to COVID and now post COVID with patient hospice identification. 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 patients with many staff leaving this sector and the challenges of health care today.

Because of these operational challenges both pre and post COVID, many patients were left with a lack of socialization as well as the necessary care required to deal with their fragile health care state. We were 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 at many levels. Some of the challenges working with communities is that hospice appropriate patients need to be addressed sooner than later. By not doing this, patients pass within days of being on service care these patients and do not experience the full benefits of hospice care. It is imperative that if there are future pandemics or any other emergent health crisis that critical care providers not be restricted at any level from seeing their patients.

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).