

HB 6645

Wednesday, March 20, 2013

Testimony of Teresa Wells to the Public Health Committee

Good Morning,

My name is Teresa Wells, and I am a registered voter living in Cheshire, Connecticut. By profession, I am a licensed nursing home administrator for The Mary Wade Home, a community in New Haven that serves frail and elderly seniors, most of whom rely on Medicare, federal funds, and Medicaid, state and federal funds, for health and nursing care, food, medicine, and clothing, in short, everything. Mary Wade was founded in 1866 as the Home for the Friendless, by an ecumenical group of women, one of them Mrs. Eli Whitney, seeking to help those in need. It is the tradition of caring for those who need friends that brings the employees to work every day. Any worker will tell you they receive as much or more from the person they are caring for than they are providing, regardless of whether or not that person can speak, or walk. The seniors at Mary Wade range in age from 85 to 101 years old.

It is precisely the "friendless," or those who believe they are friendless, who have the most to fear from legislation such as this.

We are in the midst of a huge effort by the federal government to reduce Medicare and Medicaid costs. Beginning in October 1, 2012, hospitals all over the country are receiving financial penalties for admissions to the hospital within thirty days of a prior admission. Most of these hospitalizations are seniors who may lack care coordination at home, or who are in need of palliative care or counseling. The institution of financial penalties has spurred unprecedented levels of collaboration by home health agencies, skilled nursing facilities, hospitals and physicians, to do what needs to be done to keep seniors out of the hospital and avoid those penalties. If Connecticut passes the assisted suicide legislation, how long will it be before there is a financial incentive to help someone end their life rather than receive medical care. We have already seen this in Oregon, where the same letter from the public health insurance company denying coverage of medications for treatment, offers coverage for suicide. Mary Wade cares for 200 seniors a day, 70% of whom are on public health insurance. Will suicide really be the only option for 140 of them? I believe that this will come to pass if you pass this legislation. It will be seen as the "responsible" thing to do. It robs people of dignity, robs them of their own life, and robs families and caregivers of the opportunity to care for their elders.

I have been at Mary Wade for twenty three years. I have seen families, once torn apart by hurt feelings, come to healing and resolution as they came around to care for their elderly mother or father in their final years. Hurt and anger melt away and they respond in compassion, love and obligation to the needs of their parents, aunts, uncles or neighbors.

I have watched mothers and fathers wait for that last child to appear at the bedside before they take their last breath. I have seen our wonderfully skilled doctors and nurses, learned in the healing art of palliative care, counsel residents and families about the futility of repeat visits to the hospital, helping

families come to terms with the inevitability of decline with certain diseases, come to peace with the circle of life, and provide the medications for a peaceful and pain free death. The hospice movement has greater traction in this state than ever before, having passed legislation in 2012 allowing multiple entities to become licensed inpatient hospice providers. Why would we go backwards? We have the medicines and the doctors and nurses to provide a peaceful transition from this life to the next.

If 96% of people who seek to end their own lives are seeking it because they do not want to be a burden to family or friends, they see themselves as friendless, as no one loving them enough to care for them. This is the real tragedy that needs to be turned around. Who among us does not need the love and compassion of others, to hear that we matter, that we are loved, no matter our state in life.

Respectfully yours,
Teresa Wells

Cheshire, Connecticut