

**Testimony re: Human Services Committee Bill 6634 - An Act Concerning Essential Support Persons and a State-wide Visitation Policy for Residents of Long-term Care Facilities**

**Submitted March 24, 2021 by Beth Scully, Clinton, CT**

The 1987 Federal Nursing Home Reform Act and additional protections phased in from November 2016 through 2019 establish rights for long-term care facility (LTCF) residents. Even during public health emergencies, states are obliged to recognize and advance those rights. By that standard Bill 6634 fails.

Bill 6634 fails to recognize the true nature of **essential caregivers** by equating them with mere “visitors”, the kind of people who drop by occasionally for 15 minutes with a plate of cookies or the poorly defined “essential support person” which sounds like someone who offers encouragement, not essential anything. Furthermore, the Commissioner of Public Health is given the authority to establish the parameters for “essential support person” visits without the Bill spelling out the ways in which the new policy must enhance the rights, protections, health, dignity, and well-being of residents.

The need to have unpaid **essential caregivers** to supplement paid staff reflects the chronically threadbare staffing levels at LTCFs, which is an enormous problem under the best circumstances. Pre-covid, when residents could receive “visitors” at any time because it is an enumerated right under federal law, family members regularly gave essential care that facilities are required to provide but frequently cannot. As essential caregivers we help to dress, bathe, groom, feed, toilet, and move our loved ones because staff cannot satisfactorily meet their needs. For people whose infirmities have greatly diminished their once full lives, a familiar voice, a gentle touch, a reassuring smile is often all they have left.

My 90-year-old mother with late-stage Alzheimer’s disease is unable to shift position in her wheelchair or bed. She can raise her arms but shakes so intensely that even scratching her face is impossible, let alone feeding herself. And, because of her advanced illness, she has trouble swallowing meaning that it takes well over an hour to feed her and it is difficult for her to stay hydrated. Staff haven’t the time to take care of my precious mother’s basic survival needs.

The issue at hand is not about allowing “long-term care facility residents to designate essential support persons who may visit” and establishing “a state-wide visitation policy.” It is about recognizing the vital role of essential caregivers and ensuring that as the current health crisis wanes and others arise, that LTCF residents do not lose the human connections that preserves their respect and dignity.