

December 13, 2020

Ms. Susan Keane
Administrator
Nursing Home and Assisted Living Oversight Working Group (NHALOWG)
Subgroup: Socialization, Visitation, and Caregiver Engagement
c/o Appropriations Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 2700
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

Dear Ms. Keane,

I am writing to you this morning after reading about the new Nursing home and Assisted Living oversight working group that was recently formed to evaluate and address the challenges to nursing homes during the COVID 19 pandemic. I am a Registered Nurse with over thirty years of nursing experience. I am also the primary caregiver for my mother who has Alzheimer's disease and resides in a memory care facility. I applaud Governor Lamont's actions to initially shut down these facilities at the height of the COVID pandemic. At that time, a lot of information about the virus and its effects were unknown and this decision indeed saved many lives. However, leaving this vulnerable population without direct "in person" access to their caregivers can lead to dire results on their mental and physical well-being. Research has shown social isolation, confinement, and lack of external stimulation due to COVID 19 has had negative medical consequences such as further cognitive decline, depression, weight loss, and even death (Khimmm, 2020). Although our main goal is to keep this population safe, we cannot ignore the detrimental psychological effects it is causing. Not only is it our responsibility to protect this vulnerable population, but it is also necessary to consider their mental health.

Caregivers do much more for residents than nursing staff could ever do because of time constraints, staffing issues, etc. I strongly believe it is of utmost importance for nursing homes/assisted living/memory care facilities to allow visits for one appointed caregiver who would be able to check on their loved one's well-being on a consistent basis. Several states, including Minnesota, Indiana, New Jersey, Florida, and Texas have already established what is known as an "essential caregiver policy" (Markowitz, 2020). This essential caregiver policy allows visits for one designated caregiver who will still wear masks and undergo COVID screening prior to visiting with their loved ones. These visits would provide both family members and residents with peace of mind for seeing their loved ones in person. Totally closing the facility off to caregivers leaves residents vulnerable to possible neglect and/or abuse. Using video chats to connect residents to loved ones does not work for all residents, especially those afflicted with Alzheimers Disease or other related dementias.

What I have personally experienced through this pandemic has been nothing short of a heart wrenching experience. Prior to the pandemic, I visited with my mother several times a week. During these visits, I provided my mother with needed companionship. Most importantly I was her health care advocate making sure she was receiving the care she needed. I also attended many activities with my mother which were led by the activity director. Alzheimer's disease causes changes in behavior which include agitation, hallucinations, hiding objects, etc. My mother also experiences episodes of "sundowning" where she gets extremely agitated and will refuse to take her medications or allow the staff to provide

her care. Prior to COVID-19, I was able to go to the memory care facility and sit with my mother to calm her down. Currently, trying to manage my mother's care over the phone provides little if any benefit. Although nursing assistants at these facilities do attend dementia care training, most of them still do not know how to effectively manage dementia behaviors. Since the closure of the facility to visitors, my mother has become more depressed, has gained a lot of weight due to inactivity, and has had further cognitive decline. Caregivers are and should be considered essential to their loved one's mental and physical well-being.

It has also come to my attention that different nursing homes have different visitation policies. There is no consistency between different facilities. For example, I also coordinate and bring my mother to all of her doctor's appointments. During this pandemic, I was not allowed to do so. The memory care facility indicated they were not allowing family members to take their loved ones to doctor's appointments in their own cars. Their policy was that they would bring the resident to the appointment and family members could meet them there. I am aware of other facilities where this was not the case and family members could bring their loved ones to doctor's appointments as long as they followed safety precautions. My mother is more cooperative with me assisting her with her ADL's and we get to doctor's appointments on time. Having to wait for the facility to bring her has resulted in near missed appointments due to their tardiness.

In summary, I urge the committee to consider adopting an essential care giver policy during this current pandemic. Even with a vaccine on the horizon, in person visits will still be restricted until the pandemic is over. Until that time comes, their mental and physical health will continue to suffer. I have attached articles for further review regarding this essential caregiver policy.

I would be happy to discuss this issue further at your convenience.

Thank you for your time and attention to this issue.

Sincerely,

Candace Ramirez, MSN, RN
Email: mscandieb@comcast.net

References:

Firth, Shannon (2020, June 12). Loneliness vs. COVID 19 infection among seniors. *Medscape Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.medpagetoday.com/infectiousdisease/covid19/87049>.

Khimm, Suzy (2020, Oct 27). The hidden COVID19 health crisis: Elderly people are dying from isolation. *NBC News*. Retrieved from [The hidden Covid-19 health crisis: Elderly people are dying from isolation \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/health/hidden-covid-19-health-crisis-elderly-people-dying-isolation-n1234567)

Markowitz, Andy (2020, Aug 19). *Some nursing homes expand visits for essential caregivers in lockdown*. AARP. Retrieved from. [Nursing Homes Ease COVID Lockdown for Essential Caregivers \(aarp.org\)](https://www.aarp.org/health/2020/08/19/nursing-homes-ease-covid-lockdown-essential-caregivers/)

Senator Bob Mensch Introduces Essential Family Caregivers Legislation (2020, Aug 24). Retrieved from [August 24, 2020 - Senator Bob Mensch \(senatormensch.com\)](https://www.senatormensch.com/newsroom/senator-bob-mensch-introduces-essential-family-caregivers-legislation/)

