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TESTIMONY

Delivered by Deborah R. Hoyt, President and CEO
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Before the Connecticut General Assembly Bipartisan Task Force on
Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety
Mental Health Subcommittee

January 29, 2013

Good morning Senator Harp, Representative Wood and members of the Mental Health Subcommittee.

My name is Deborah Hoyt, President and CEO of the Connecticut Association for Healthcare at Home – formerly the Connecticut Association for Home Care and Hospice.

The Association represents 60 licensed and certified home health and hospice agencies that performed nearly 5-million home and community-based visits throughout inner cities and rural areas of Connecticut last year.

As a growing Connecticut workforce of 11,000 caregivers and skilled nurses, *we* are the *only* health providers that walk through the front doors of 14,000 state residents each day. We manage chronic illness in children and adults, provide high-tech interventions in a person's living room, save the state millions of dollars by preventing avoidable hospital readmissions, enable seniors to "age in place", and maintain the behavioral health population in our 169 cities and towns.

Of the 5-million home visits completed last year, approximately 2-million of these visits were to administer physician-ordered medications (anti-psychotics) to behavioral health patients with serious and persistent mental illness with the goal of keeping them reasonably functional within the community.

As your Subcommittee examines population and community-based safety in your response to the tragic murders in Newtown, it is important that you are aware of the large number of individuals, at one time institutionalized in state-run behavioral health facilities, now living as our neighbors in every Connecticut town.

Managing these mental health patients in the community are dozens of specially trained psychiatric nurses who enable individuals with unpredictable behavior to live at home and be productive members of society.

These nurses are experts in identifying subtle changes in their clients on a daily basis and are the eyes and ears for local authorities monitoring potentially dangerous situations. Invisible to most, these psychiatric “medication administration” nurses are ensuring the safety of Connecticut communities every day, allowing each of us to sleep soundly at night.

In addition to firearms, another real threat to the safety of our citizens is the collapse of Connecticut’s home health safety net. State budget tightening has resulted in years of inadequate Medicaid reimbursement to our licensed home care agencies -- particularly the 20 agencies that employ these psychiatric nurses. Four agencies closed their doors last year, as reimbursement didn’t cover the costs to provide services. Other agencies are struggling and we will likely see additional closures in the coming years.

Shortsightedness on the part of the state to invest in the sustainability of community-based care to this patient population will force home care agencies to discontinue providing these services and the need for the state to reopen the now empty and more costly mental health institutions.

Home health care and medication administration are proven to be the cost effective solution to the state’s healthcare and fiscal crises. Additionally, the Newtown tragedy reminds us how important home health workers are in maintaining this potentially volatile population living amongst us.

As you continue your dialogue and research, we welcome you to accompany one of our psychiatric nurses in the field for a few hours to witness the vital work that they do. Please reach out to us as a resource for additional information at any time.

Thank you.