

TO: Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, chaired by Rep. James E. Clyburn

FROM: Amy Badini, Old Greenwich, CT

RE: Nursing Home Quality

DATE: 21 September 2022

When the first case of the coronavirus was identified in the United States back in January 2020, and when a Public Health Emergency was subsequently declared, we could not have foreseen the devastation that COVID-19 would wreak on our long-term care facilities, claiming the lives of more than 130,000 residents. Most died alone, without the comfort or embrace of loved ones – not from a lack of care, but because long-term care residents across the country became victims of the pandemic twice over. First, there was the disease. Next there was the isolation brought about by the policies put in place to try to keep that disease at bay. The nationwide long-term care lockdown meant that visitors and non-essential staff were banned. Access for those who had previously provided informal essential care for our nation’s vulnerable long-term care residents was quickly stamped out, labeling these mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, grandchildren, and close friends simply as “visitors”.

These decisions were made in good faith at the time, but we are now 2 ½ years smarter; we know there were deadly unintended consequences. The social isolation that stemmed from this lockdown caused an epidemic of loneliness that silently and swiftly spread within long-term care walls in every state. COVID-19 destroyed lives, but isolation additionally destroyed hearts, minds, and ultimately human spirits. The individual stories differ, but they have similar ends. Locking frail residents behind closed doors, closing them off from human contact, restricting them from dignities like the right to worship, and limiting access to personal medical care resulted in additional lives being destroyed through self-harm, dehydration, cognitive decline, despondency, terminal weight loss, and worse. These deadly situations, however, were entirely preventable.

We now know better and must learn from this catastrophe to ensure it never happens again. Please pass the Essential Caregivers Act (H.R. 3733) is a crucial step to providing a life-saving social safety net to those who need it most. Permitting Essential Caregivers – those who provide assistance consisting of activities of daily living, emotional support, or companionship the access to their loved ones during any public health emergency would be a significant step towards prioritizing the life, livelihood, and safety of residents.

If the Essential Caregivers Act is not passed, we will be destined to repeat the devastation that has cruelly landed on those most unprotected. The national pandemic exposed an already vulnerable industry. The time is now to take deep look on how we care for the elderly and disabled in our country. While institutional care will always be needed, it may look very different in the future.