

Statement for the Record - House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis Hearing 9.21.22

September 21, 2022

Dear Honorable Chairman Clyburn and Members of the House Select Subcommittee,

My father, Ron Von Ronne, is living with late stage Alzheimer's in a single star rated nursing home in Albany, NY. In July of 2020, my family went 100 days without any contact with him. Prior to COVID, my family would visit my father upwards of four times a week in order to bathe him, bring him clean clothes and make sure he was eating, as there were always too many resident tasks for the amount of staff on hand. More importantly, we were the connection to his life outside the facility; a wife, four kids, seven grandkids, a former ski instructor for the disabled. When the lockdown happened, our only proof of life became a single response to my mother's desperate calls to the administration as the virus crept inside: "He's fine."

During the COVID nursing home lockdown, my father was assaulted multiple times. Only weeks after we were finally granted a video call with him, he appeared on camera with a large contusion on his head due to another resident punching him and knocking him down. He appeared on Christmas 2021 with a black eye. Multiple reports were filed. The incidents kept happening.

Over the course of the two years that my family was locked out, my father lost all of his belongings. Often times he would appear on camera in only a hospital gown and when asked, the social worker showed us that his entire closet was empty: no shirts, no shoes, not even a pair of pants. When I did a review of his prescribed medications, his dosage for anti-psychotics had increased six times the amount he was prescribed pre-COVID. Video calls with my father were simply for proof of life. He didn't understand what a computer was, and often times he was too sedated for us to even assess his wellbeing.

Today, my family has access once again. There is still no reliable hot water on Dad's floor and on average there are only two staff to assist an entire unit of residents on the weekend. Despite the fact that my mother and Medicaid is paying thousands of dollars for Dad's care, we are forced to find solutions to this problem. In the short term, we care for Dad where his facility cannot. Nursing homes desperately need staffing improvements, proper oversight and accountability, both financial and functional. **A most immediate, yet partial, solution is H.R. 3733, the Essential Caregivers Act. This federal legislation would designate family members as essential caregivers and, with proper training and PPE, allow them to access to their loved one in long-term care during times of crisis.** This legislation, drafted by families, residents and healthcare workers, currently sits waiting review

with the House of Representatives. With your help, long-term care residents can at least restore one thing that they lost during the COVID crisis: their voice.

I also recommend a federal task force, made up of residents, families, healthcare staff, advocacy organizations, industry leaders, state Ombudsman, legislators and facility owners that can not only begin to rebuild the broken system, but create a culture of trust and cooperation that currently does not exist today. Without communication and cooperation, the system has no hope of repair.

By opening the doors and the conversations up to the people living the experience—the residents, their families and the healthcare workers—effective change, not blind policy, will rewrite the historic tragedy of COVID in long-term care.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,

Mikko Cook

5th Congressional District, Massachusetts

Essential Caregivers Coalition

Co-Founder

www.essentialcaregiverscoalition.org

Essential Caregivers Movement

www.wearenotvisitors.com