



To: Senator Bill White, Chairman, and Members of the Senate Committee on Seniors, Families, Veterans, & Military Affairs

From: Nicole Lynch
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VOYCE

Re: Support for the Essential Caregivers Act in SB 671

VOYCE is a St. Louis-based organization that advocates for quality long-term care and is one of the state's seven Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program providers. We are here today to ask for your support of the Essential Caregivers Act in SB 671.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult for everyone. But long-term care residents have disproportionately been impacted. For nearly a year, residents were completely isolated to their bedrooms, away from family, friends, and other loved ones. The harsh restrictive visitation policies intended to protect them failed as every nursing home in the state had at least one COVID outbreak. Not only did these policies fail at protecting residents from COVID, but they also caused direct harm to the physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being of the residents.

Under federal law, long-term care residents have the right to visitation from family and friends any time of day or night. This right to visitation is vital for residents' health. We must learn from past mistakes and do better for these residents in the future. The Essential Caregivers Act does just that by addressing three key issues during any future periods of restricted visitation:

1. Essential caregivers play an important role in the routine care of their loved ones. They provide support in daily routines, including mouth care, eating

and drinking, bathing, grooming, toileting, personal hygiene, and so much more. When long-term care facilities went on lockdown, we saw a sharp decline in resident care. Residents were forced to rely on a direct care workforce stretched dangerously thin, and the staff was unable to provide adequate care to residents.

Missouri ranks 50th in the nation for the number of care hours we provide per resident per day. This has been the case for every quarter since the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) started releasing this data in 2017. On average, a Missouri nursing home resident receives only 3.3 hours of care per day, falling well below the federal standard of 4.1 hours per day. Essential Caregivers can help fill this gap. Because every hour an Essential Caregiver is in the facility is an hour that a staff person can spend caring for others. The reality is that there is not enough staff to work in long-term care, and when there is not enough staff, the residents are not receiving enough care.

2. Extreme isolation has devastating effects on mental health and cognition. It often leads to what can only be referred to as "sudden frailty" - a process that typically takes months to years but happens in just weeks. Residents who were once full of life and in relatively good or stable health suddenly lost the ability to do basic functions such as eating or walking. This quickly leads to death due to "failure to thrive," where the body and mind lose the intrinsic motivation to survive. According to a researcher at the University of San Francisco, it is estimated that for every two COVID- related nursing home deaths, another one resident died in the shadows from isolation and neglect. In Missouri, this would mean that nearly 2,000 residents needlessly died a preventable death.
3. Lastly, essential caregivers play a critical role in monitoring care and advocating for the resident's needs. People living in long-term care must rely on others for even their most basic needs. When these needs are not being met, residents cannot always identify the issues and articulate the problem(s) to a staff member. This is especially true of those who are suffering from Alzheimer's and Dementia-related disorders. Essential caregivers involved with their loved ones' care are often keen to notice

changes to physical and mental health. They can quickly identify and bring attention to concerns before the issues become more severe or life-threatening. There is truly no one who knows and understands a resident's needs better than the people who love them.

The ability for long-term care residents to be with their loved ones is so much more than a simple piece of legislation. This is the difference between life and death for thousands of Missouri residents. Please, make the compassionate choice of supporting quality long-term care by voting do-pass on the Essential Caregivers Act.