

February 19, 2020

Written testimony of Kevin O’Connell, CEO Geer Village Senior Community Concerning the Governor’s Recommended FY 2020 and FY 2021 Proposed Budget

Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Kevin O’Connell. I am the CEO of Geer Village Senior Community in North Canaan, Connecticut. For over 80 years, Geer Village Senior Community has played an integral role in caring for the elderly across the northwest corner of this state. Geer is very much a community for over 320 employees, volunteers, the citizens of North Canaan and the surrounding communities. Since its humble beginnings, Geer has operated as a Non-Profit organization providing healthcare services and housing for seniors in a rural setting. We are a mission-driven organization focused on helping seniors. We operate a 120-bed nursing home, Assisted Living Facility, Medical Model Adult Day Center, Dial-A-Ride program, HUD subsidized senior housing, Pharmacy and Outpatient Therapy Services. Geer even has a YMCA on its campus that serves the local community.

I want to begin by thanking the Appropriations Committee for supporting increases in last session’s budget for nursing home wage and benefit increases. Geer used that funding to increase wages for our lowest paid employees ahead of the schedule set forth by the state, advancing our lowest paid employees to \$12 per hour effective December 1st, 2019 rather than waiting until September 1st, 2020 as required by law. In addition, Geer had to increase wages for those employees who were already making \$12 per hour but found themselves suddenly feel the squeeze of wage compression. Recruiting and retaining workers in Connecticut’s very competitive labor market remains one of our most pressing challenges. In fact, finding enough skilled clinicians in the most rural parts of our state is a huge problem for all healthcare employers like Geer. Without exaggeration, Geer could hire over 30 certified nurses’ aides, LPNs, RNs and therapists across its campus, today, if we could find them. Having an ample supply of skilled workers to meet the needs of seniors with increasing care needs on all shifts will become even more challenging as the Connecticut minimum wage continues to rise. Certified nurses’ aides face working conditions that are physically and mentally demanding. If a young person can make the same wage as a CNA but do so without having to face those same physical demands, I don’t think anyone would blame them for making that choice. While I am happy for all of those that received a wage increase due to the minimum wage law, we are now experiencing some very real unintended consequences. Please know these new wage enhancement dollars help in the ongoing struggle to assure quality care but they also have the effect of driving caregivers out of the field all together. This is a loss that we absolutely cannot afford if the intention is to improve

the quality of care. Driving improvements in quality metrics or mandating minimum staffing levels will not help if employers cannot find the people to do the work. I strongly urge this committee to closely study the unintended consequences of the legislation being considered around labor, healthcare and reimbursement for this new budget.

I also want you to know how proud I am of all Geer employees, many of whom have worked at Geer for over 20 years. These devoted caregivers, from our kitchens, housekeeping, maintenance and clinical programs, want exactly what I want; that is to deliver the highest quality care experience to anyone who receives care across the continuum of services that Geer offers. These workers are doing an amazing job, and I am so proud of them for everything they do for our residents and families. Because of the dedication of our employees, both the assisted living facility and nursing home at Geer received the Bronze Quality Award from the American Healthcare Associations (AHCA) in 2019. The AHCA/NCAL National Quality Award Program provides a pathway for providers of long term and post-acute care services to journey towards performance excellence. The program is based on the core values and criteria of the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. This award recognizes how effective Geer services are at helping people stay well and live as independently as possible.

Some examples of services that make a huge difference for seniors include Geer's transportation program and adult day center (ADC). Geer operates a sophisticated Dial-a-Ride program with over a dozen vehicles, using an electronic transportation management system. Each year the Geer Dial-A-Ride provides over 20,000 rides for seniors, at no cost to them, to medical appointments, doctors' offices, the pharmacy to pick up vital medication, shopping and other critical services. This program not only serves the town of North Canaan but six other rural communities across the northwest corner covering over 500 square miles. Our adult day center (ADC) is a full medical model program that provides community-based seniors with access to help with daily hygiene, access to podiatry, audiology and dental services, medication management, two meals a day, and transportation. These services help working families keep seniors home instead of looking for long-term placement. The people supported by the ADC and Dial-A-Ride are the same individuals that would be most at risk of having to live in a nursing home under the Medicaid program if these support services didn't exist. Support programs like the adult day center and Dial-A-Ride do not make money. They are break even at best, yet they are exactly what seniors need if they are to age in place in their homes successfully. We are all aware of the state's long-term care rebalancing plan and the need to help seniors age well in their homes. I ask that you recognize how vital the services provided by Geer are in helping Connecticut achieve its rebalancing plan goals. For our community-based services to make a difference, they must be funded adequately.

I also see the challenges Geer faces with caring for our most vulnerable seniors living in nursing homes. We operate in a regulatory environment that correctly expects improved quality metrics but does not recognize how underfunded our long-term care reimbursement system currently is. Major changes are being developed called "Case Mix" which will change the way Medicaid reimburses our nursing home this year. While we in concept agree with Case Mix and how it reimburses nursing homes based on the care needs, or acuity, of the residents, we are also afraid that

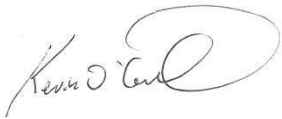
the new Case Mix payments will ignore the Medicaid funding shortfalls of the past decade, and that quality will suffer with insufficient resources.

Certainly, our shared goal of providing the highest quality of care possible for seniors in the least expensive setting within their communities will be threatened if Medicaid underfunding isn't addressed. Long-term care providers will not be able to adjust their operations adequately to support the goals of aging in place.

Our elected officials need to know that delivering the quality care everyone wants for their loved ones is getting harder and harder to provide in Connecticut. Our employees know this very well. The reason isn't hard to understand--- there has been almost no additional Medicaid help in the state budget for over a decade, but the nursing home population is older and sicker than it was twenty years ago. We see so much more dementia and Alzheimer's disease than ever before. Today's nursing home residents also have greater behavioral health needs-----mental health and substance use disorders are common on top of the skilled nursing care that today's nursing home residents need. There are few if any other choices for receiving the kind of treatment these seniors need outside of a nursing home. Case Mix could be an answer, but only if the funding shortfall is addressed.

Please help us deliver the care we all want and please make long overdue nursing home funding a priority in this year's budget.

On behalf of everyone at Geer Village Senior Community, thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



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