

Testimony of Phyllis Aronson
Administrator of Sedgwick Cedars Residential Care Home
Re: H.B. No. 6439- AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM
ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.
Concerning
Department of Social Services Budget- Residential Care Home Funding
Appropriations Subcommittee on Human Services Public Hearing, March 3, 2021

Senator Osten, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on the Department of Social Services Budget related to Residential Care Home Funding.

My name is Phyllis Aronson and I am the Administrator of the Sedgwick Cedars Residential Care Home of the Sisters of St. Joseph, in West Hartford. I am writing this testimony because of my concerns about the Governor's budget related to residential care homes. I strongly believe residential care homes throughout the state need a rate increase.

We are a 24-bed home for retired nuns. We provide round-the-clock care for our residents, including 3 meals per day, nursing care, activities, and companion visits for medical appointments. Some of our residents have various stages of dementia and our staff has to monitor them closely. We help the residents with whatever activities of daily living they need help with, including dressing, showering, wound care, diabetic testing, and medication administration. We monitor their safety and well-being 24/7; there is a professional care giver in the building at all times.

The biggest challenge with the lack of rate increases has been the inability to pay our employees a fair wage and attract good new workers. Consequently, the care of our residents may suffer. We have had increased challenges with the pandemic. The employees we have spent many hours putting in reliable and hard work for little more than the minimum wage! These are loyal employees who continued working during this challenging year of the pandemic, including several weeks that we had confirmed cases within our building!

We value our employees who deserve much more compensation for the work they do for a challenging population. Several of our employees had to temporarily stop working for us when they got covid themselves or had family members they had to care for who had covid. We were so short-staffed that our remaining staff worked double shifts, extra shifts, overtime, all while having to wear gowns, masks, face shields, and putting themselves at risk; they risked their lives working for us. All for an hourly wage that is embarrassing to disclose, and most without health or other benefits from us.

Yes, most of our staff are per diem, meaning they don't get benefits from us but work fulltime elsewhere for their benefits. Consequently, we do not have the advantage of their working for us primarily but only during the time they have left over from their other, fulltime work. Furthermore, if we could afford to pay our people more money and provide benefits, we could ensure the safety of our residents by asking those

employees not to work elsewhere and possibly expose themselves. The fact that most of our employees work elsewhere means that they are also increasing their exposure and possibly exposing our residents to whatever they are exposed to in their other jobs.

Unfortunately, paying employees the necessary wages to keep current employees satisfied and attract new people to our industry continues to be a challenge. We strive to hold onto our good employees so that they can establish and maintain relationships with our residents. This leads to better long-term health outcomes, stability in the home and savings to our state. I am unable to attract good new people with the rates we offer.

My facility is very short-staffed now; we are down approximately half what we were before the pandemic, and things were dicey then, too. We have to cover 90+ shifts in any given month, and we now have only 6 people (was 12 pre-pandemic) with whom to try to cover all the shifts.

Unlike other providers during the pandemic, we did not see any federal funding to support our work or our employees. The Governor's proposal to enable residential care homes to bill Medicaid acknowledges the need for higher rates. However, our industry has significant concerns with the proposal since it cuts money out of the state budget. That funding has been dedicated to residential care homes and becoming a Medicaid provider is a significant change to our model of care.

We provide a critical service for the state and care for some of the most vulnerable people. All of our resident nuns were working for many years out in the community as nurses, teachers, hospital administrators, and working with some of the poorest and most vulnerable citizens. They contributed to society as long as they could and now they are unable to carry on and need help themselves. We care for them at a low cost to the state.

My home and other residential care homes throughout the state have had to get by with rates failing to keep up with costs and yet we serve as the safety net for people in their 70's to 100 with no family to care for them or savings of their own – people who had devoted themselves to others all of their lives. Our residents are almost all state-funded, limiting our ability to cost shift and make up for low rates.

Please support residential care home funding and uncap our rates so that we can keep our great employees and pay them fairer wages and attract new, well-qualified people to care for some of the most vulnerable in the state.

Thank you for your consideration. We understand that there are many competing causes for your consideration. But please keep in mind that we have not had a rate increase for 12 years. We have been patient and done the best we could on little. But now we do need more. Thank you.

Phyllis Aronson

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