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United for Quality Care

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Rob Baril, President  
SEIU District 1199 New England  
Before the Appropriations Committee

Good Afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker, and members of the Committee. My name is Rob Baril and I am President of District 1199 New England. Our union represents approximately 26,000 workers across Connecticut who deliver care in public and private healthcare settings. Of those members, over 15,000 of them are workers in the long term care sector which has been ravaged by the COVID pandemic in the last year. I'm talking Nursing Home workers of all kinds, Home Care workers, and group home workers. Working-class Black, brown and white workers who continue to provide care with love, but are instead being treated as expendable workers by our state's Governor. These caregivers work daily with our state's most vulnerable. They are nurses, certified nursing assistants, licensed practical nurses, as well as dietary, housekeeping, recreation aides, personal care attendants, and direct care workers. They are the backbone of the health care delivery system for Connecticut's elderly and disabled who suffer from diseases like dementia and Alzheimer's disease, among other ailments

Of those three industries, Nursing Homes have been most hard-hit. Direct care workers are at risk of contracting COVID-19 every time they report to work. Residents are living in fear for their lives. And they've lost access to visits from their family members and other critical support systems. Thousands of residents have died, and thousands of direct long-term caregivers have gotten sick. District 1199 has lost 17 long-term care workers as of today. We have heard countless stories of caregivers who brought the virus home to fragile family members. Some of their household relatives eventually lost their lives to the virus. Francene Bailey, a CNA at Kimberly Hall North, hasn't fully recovered from the virus. And her own mother died because she brought the virus home. Another member woke up to find her husband lying dead next to her. And yet another lost a brother and a father within two weeks of each other. The indifferent acceptance of our state public health officials of the lives lost is unacceptable.

The unique factors that are present in this workforce must be acknowledged. These workers have multiple full-time jobs, and they provide services by moving between nursing homes, home care consumers and group homes. Nursing home workers also have jobs in home care and elsewhere due to their low wages. The pay is so low they cannot afford to stay home. They cannot deliver care through a computer. There are no telecommuting options for them. We must be proactive and prepared to protect workers and the people they care for every day. And the first step is to see and to validate the real scope of the risks associated with their jobs in the middle of a pandemic. *Their voices must not only be heard but believed and heeded.* Anything less is morally outrageous and a danger to public health.

Implementing half-measures instead of addressing root causes is just going to make this crisis worse. And it will only add to the suffering and death that our members

experience daily. Staffing shortages at nursing homes caused deaths of our members and deaths of residents. Many nursing home workers don't have affordable health insurance. In long term care, worker health and safety is resident health and safety. But you can't solve these problems without investing more money in residents and caregivers.

Funding for nursing homes must be increased. I'm talking by 160 million dollars – half of which will be reimbursed by the federal government. Increasing funds to support nursing homes is the right thing to do for residents and the caregivers who serve them every day. Our members' workloads have increased exponentially because of low staffing levels, and they are still underpaid, not to mention risking their lives everyday to do their job.

Many of these workers have not seen a wage raise in several years and even if they did, it equated to about \$.80. The funding I'm talking about is a real investment. Some workers are barely making \$15 an hour in some cases, and they are taking care of residents who need more round-the-clock care services. We fear that we are headed towards strikes if the state fails to improve working conditions in many of Connecticut's nursing homes with this budget. Striking scenarios will be much easier to avoid with a proper funding increase in support of higher wages and full staffing.

Our members do this work because they care about residents. They see their residents as family members. They want to be able to care for their patients as they would care for their own family. They want to be able to provide good company and human interaction. They want to make residents feel loved through small gestures and to provide comfort to those that are in hospice. They also want to be able to go home at night and not have to worry about how they are going to provide for their own families. They don't want to have to worry about how they will be able to survive if they fall sick, or if they decide to retire. We need to have the courage as a state and make a real investment in these workers lives.

At the other end of the spectrum, Home and Community Based Medicaid waivers allow consumers to stay in the home and employ a caregiver of their choice. The need for these services is growing so much that the State of Connecticut projects that home care provided through Medicaid will increase from 67.6% of long-term care enrollees in 2017 to 82.3% by 2040. This program is administered by the Department of Social Services and two fiscal intermediaries manage this payment system for the Connecticut Department of Social Services, Allied and Sunset Shores. The workers in this industry are constantly disrespected. They do not have sick leave, they have no retirement benefits, no job security and some of them make \$16.25 an hour. They live paycheck to paycheck and if they are not paid on time, there are serious repercussions in their lives.

Therefore, the job of the fiscal intermediary, Allied in this case, is to process and make payments in a timely fashion. However, Allied regularly messes this up causing workers to have to scramble to make ends meet, make decisions about what bills to pay,

and in many cases these late or non-existent payments become much bigger and lead to thousands of dollars of debt.

Close to 90% of homecare providers are women, and we believe the majority are also people of color who are caring for low-income consumers. As the payroll agent for all DSS programs, we know that Allied's payroll is disproportionately made up black and brown caregivers compared with Sunset Shores, which serves a comparatively whiter and higher wage workforce. What this means is that any problem impacting homecare workers paid by Allied also raises issues of disparate treatment toward caregivers of color. Ensuring that the Allied payroll system effectively pays PCAs on time and accurately is therefore a pressing issue of both racial and economic justice. We believe that the right thing to do is cancel the contract with Allied immediately.

I spoke about group homes at yesterday's hearing, and today I am continuing to talk about long term care because it is so important that we get it right in our state. The Governor doesn't seem to get that. He would like to continue cutting services and pushing workers into poverty jobs. District 1199 believes that our state can be better if we just have the courage to stand up and fight for racial and economic justice for workers like these. We won't stop fighting. Thank you for your time.