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**March 3, 2021**

*Written testimony of Kevin O'Connell, Chief Executive Officer, Geer Nursing and Rehabilitation Center Concerning the Governor's Recommended FY 2022 and FY 2023 Proposed Budget*

Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and to the 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 has played an integral role in caring for the elderly across the northwest corner of this state. Geer is a community for over 300 employees, volunteers, the citizens of North Canaan and the surrounding communities. Since its humble beginnings, Geer has operated as a Non-Profit organization providing both inpatient and outpatient services and housing for seniors in a rural setting. We are a mission-driven organization focused on helping seniors maintain the best quality of life possible. We operate a 120-bed nursing home, Assisted Living Facility with several levels of dementia care, an extensive Dial-A-Ride program, HUD subsidized senior housing, Pharmacy, Outpatient Therapy Services, and a YMCA. Geer had also been operating a restaurant on its campus that served the residents and the local community and a medical model Adult Day Center (ADC) up until April of 2020. I say had because our experience with the coronavirus pandemic over the past 12 months forced us to completely rethink how we support the community around us and keep the vulnerable seniors living on our campus as safe as possible. Beginning in March of 2020 when the Governor issued his first executive order affecting the nursing home response to COVID-19, we began separating Geer's community-based services from life on campus. We immediately closed the Railway cafe which was located inside our assisted living facility. We simply could not find a safe way to let the local community mingle with residents. At that time, we did not have the PPE, testing, or even a basic understanding of how this virus spread. In hindsight that decision early on probably saved lives.

After closing the cafe, we closed the adult day center and Dial-a-Ride program. This was a full medical model ADC that provided 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 helped 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 did not exist. We simply did not have the ability to test or screen community-based participants and ensure the virus did not spread within the program.

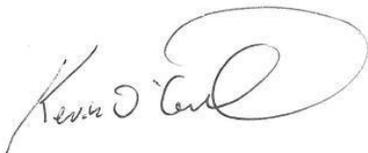
Our nursing home, assisted living, the residents we serve, and our employees, have been challenged like at no other time during the COVID-19 public health emergency. We were specifically impacted. After eight months of hard work keeping the virus at bay, our assisted living facility experienced an outbreak in October of 2020. 36 of our residents and 15 staff contracting the virus. While 27 assisted living residents recovered, we lost 9 to the highly contagious and deadly virus. What is especially heartbreaking and tragic is that our staff did all that was in their power to protect our residents. We implemented all the CDC and DPH protocols. We implemented rigorous resident and staff testing when testing became available. We secured the PPE we needed and overcame the supply shortages that were present early in the pandemic. I am very proud what we were able to avoid an outbreak in our skilled nursing facility however, we still faced staffing challenges like never before in our history. Our residents, families, and staff adapted to the emotionally devastating visitor restrictions by facilitating communication and visitors through outdoor, indoor when allowed, compassionate care and virtual visits.

The sustained vigilance of our staff and the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out are now showing us the pathway to the end of this pandemic for our nursing home. Through an intense education and incentive program, we are proud to report that 98% of our residents received both doses of vaccine and over 86% percent of staff stepped forward for the safety of all and accepted their vaccinations.

The biggest risk we face now is the severe decline in nursing home occupancy due to the ongoing pandemic. Our operating margin was thin to begin with. This national health crisis created unprecedented financial consequences to our already underfunded nursing home. Our current occupancy has fallen to 75%. While our costs have grown significantly. We believe we will recover by 2022, but much more support is needed for our us get us to the other side of this pandemic. The federal and state support we have received this far has been put to good use, but much more help will be needed in the state budget Connecticut adopts this session. The level funding and severely underfunded acuity-based payment system in the Governor's proposed budget for nursing homes must not be approved. At this critical juncture, a substantial funding increase to our nursing homes is imperative so we can deliver the high-quality care we know everyone wants as we recover from this pandemic.

On behalf of everyone at Geer Village Senior Community, please substantially increase the funding for our severely threatened Connecticut nursing homes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kevin O'Connell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Kevin O'Connell, CEO  
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