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Written testimony of Russell Schwartz, VP/Director of Operations, of Avon Health Center and West Hartford Health & 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 Russell Schwartz. I am the VP/Director of Operations, of Avon Health Center and West Hartford Health & Rehabilitation Center in the towns of Avon & West Hartford, Connecticut. Our facilities have been providing nursing home care in our communities for over 40 years. Avon is a 120-bed facility and West Hartford is a 160-bed facility. Combined, we have 400 employees working at our facilities.

Our facilities, our residents and staff have been challenged like we have not been before, during this seemingly never ending COVID-19 public outbreak. Both facilities had 2 separate outbreaks: one in the spring and one in the fall. Avon had 98 residents and 64 employees contracting the virus, and a total of 27 residents lost. West Hartford had 132 residents and 78 employees contracting the virus, and a total of 25 residents lost. We did not lose any staff to this deadly virus.

As diligent as we were with resident and staff testing, infection control practices, use of PPE, increased environmental cleaning, and limited to no building visitation, we could not prevent the spread of this virulent virus. We followed all CDC and DPH protocols and adapted our practices as more about the virus was learned. It has been a heartbreaking and tragic year, with many people sick and many lives lost. There have been a lot of sleepless nights. Our staff did everything they could to protect our residents.

I am very proud our staff and how we battled this virus, which spread through asymptomatic persons in communities with challenging rates of community spread. We have adapted to the severe visitor restrictions, and the emotional toll it had on our residents and families. Were it not for the

technology of Zoom, Facetime and Skype, that facilitated virtual visits, the impact of social isolation could have been worse. Our dedicated staff scheduled and facilitated these individual visits throughout the buildings for everyone that could participate.

The sustained vigilance of our staff and the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out are now showing us a light at the end of the tunnel. Our resident vaccination rate is 95%+ and 55% of our staff have been vaccinated. We continue to reach out to our unvaccinated staff to work through their individual objections. Our goal is to reach 75-80% of staff vaccinated.

There has been a significant occupancy decline during this pandemic. Our facilities continue to run at 70% occupancy, when we normally run at 90% or better. This decline has created unprecedented financial consequences to our already underfunded nursing homes. While we anticipate a near full recovery by 2022, we need more financial support to reach the other side of this pandemic. The state and federal support we have received thus far has helped us avoid insolvency. Much more help is necessary and this needs to be included in the state budget Connecticut adopted this session. Over the past 10+ years, the industry has been underfunded by at least \$120 million. While some limited funding for pass through wage increases has helped our staff, there are structural reimbursement system deficiencies that are crippling the industry. A big unfunded mandate not addressed in the system is the \$15 per minimum wage requirement by 2023. The average Medicaid rate runs \$30 per day or more below cost for each Medicaid resident. The level underfunding over the past decade, coupled with a significantly underfunded acuity-based payment system in the Governor's proposed budget must not be approved. Skilled nursing facilities are at a critical juncture and many are fighting for survival. A substantial funding increase is needed, to allow for our recovery and to maintain a standard of high-quality care for our residents.

On behalf of everyone at Avon Health Center and West Hartford Health & Rehabilitation Center, please vote to increase the funding for our Connecticut nursing homes.

Thank you.