

January 15, 2021

Dear Senator, Roers,

I am writing today in support of SB 2145, a bill that would assign designated caregivers to long term care residents.

My name is Tessa Johnson, and I am a registered nurse in North Dakota. I am the Executive Director of CountryHouse residence in Dickinson North Dakota. CountryHouse Residence is licensed as a basic care and memory care home. I also serve as the NDNA President.

March 13, 2020 will be a day that I will never forget. That will be the day I did the unthinkable. I locked the doors to our home to keep our family members out. CountryHouse is owned by a family company called Agemark. Agemark is owned and operated by a family and family is a true spirit of who we are and what we do. Whether it is our staff, our residents, or their family members we believe so strongly in the value of family.

All the residents that live in my building have some sort of memory loss such as dementia. Their conditions change rapidly. Sometimes they change by the day sometimes by the week and sadly, sometimes by the minute. Every single minute of time they have is precious to their families. During the last 10 months some of our residents have changed drastically. Some of their family members have not been able to see them at all. Sadly, some of our residents no longer remember their family members from when they got to see them last. As a Director, I have had to make some of the hardest decisions in my life. For an example, I had a gentleman who is in his last hours of life. His wife who still lived on their family farm, was on her last day of quarantine for COVID. I had to make a tough decision was she allowed to come in and say goodbye to her husband or not. Those kinds of decisions will haunt me for the rest of my life regardless of the decisions I make. Most recently I have another resident who is seeing the tolls of dementia and in his last days of life. Just last week I had to kick some of his family members out for him to meet his great granddaughter for the first and last time. These are moments this family should be able to cherish together. These are the moments where we need to remember that these are human beings and that these are human lives. We need to be humans.

In addition, during this pandemic we have been very fortunate in the building in which I work. We have only had two positive residents and they have both recovered well. Although, we have had staff that have been positive. Because we are small, and we only have approximately 30 to 35 staff when we have three full-time staff out with COVID that drastically affects our staffing. We had several family members, who most are elderly, offered to come in and help during these times. It would not be realistic for them to become CNA's in that short period of time or ask them to go through that training. Although, there could have been many things that they could have done physically, emotionally, and spiritually that could have helped our residents and our staff. And they would have been able to see their own loved ones.

Also, during this time our governor passed to allow asymptomatic positive staff to be able to return into the building to take care of COVID positive patients. I have been publicly speaking out against this. However, I find it very ironic that we were going to allow this to happen although we still are not allowing family members to be appropriately screened and wear the appropriate personal protective equipment and still not be able to visit.

The residents that I care for and the residents across the state in long-term care facilities are precious. They have precious time left with us. We need to find a way to be sure that they can spend those last precious time of their life with those that love them the most. We must be an advocate for them. We must look for a way to move forward and to do that safely.

I strongly believe that the designated caregiver bill will allow us the framework to do this. As an administrator and as a long-term care employee we know that we must start opening our doors. We owe it to our residents our families in our communities. When I move a resident into my building, I make a promise to them and their families to do everything I can to give them the best life and the most joy I possibly can. I can only do so much, the residents in my building deserve to have their loved ones around them and they deserve to see their family.

I thank you for your consideration.

Warm Regards,

Tessa Johnson, MSN, BSN, RN CDP

Executive Director CountryHouse Residence

President, NDNA

President, ND Center for Nursing

tjohnson@countryhouse.net