

Testimony
Senate Bill 2145 - Department of Human Services
Senate Human Services Committee
Senator Judy Lee, Chairman

January 18, 2021

Chairman Lee and members of the Senate Human Services Committee. I am Karla Backman, State Long-Term Care Ombudsman. Essentially, I am the program administrator for the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program in North Dakota. I am testifying today in support of Senate Bill 2145.

As the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman, I have the honor and responsibility to advocate to protect the health, welfare, safety, and rights of residents of long-term care facilities. As you are fully aware in response to the public health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, both federal and state authorities responded by waiving many rights of the residents of long-term care facilities. One of the rights waived that has had much attention was the right to visitation from individuals of the resident's choosing.

The restrictions on visitation have taken a significant toll, impacting residents' physical, psychosocial, and mental well-being. The ombudsmen have heard the stories of residents who were fully functional, walking, and talking and through the time period of restrictions became withdrawn, lost mobility and muscle tone, and whose communications became disjointed and unclear. The negative effects experienced by many residents illustrates the critical necessity of support and interaction between residents and families and friends.

Designated caregivers can be a part of the solution to reduce the unintended but harmful consequences of prolonged physical separation and social isolation on residents through the in-person engagement they can provide. They can assist with communication with staff, aiding with eating, resident engagement and activities, and basic socializing.

Designated caregivers are also seen as a support to the staff of long-term care facilities. Even during 'normal times' staff are busy attending to the myriad of resident needs. During times of public emergency there is an increased toll on staff caused by additional responsibilities, requirements, and staff shortages.

I support Senate Bill 2145 as it is a step towards restoring to residents of long-term care the right to have in-person contact with designated individuals and protecting this right in the future. I believe Senate Bill 2145 is a step towards moving past crisis response to establishing best practice for residents of long-term care facilities. It honors the rights that residents should not have temporarily lost and is person-centered.

Thank you for your time.

This concludes my testimony, and I welcome questions from the committee.