

Testimony in Support of SB 2226

Residential End-of-Life Facilities

House Human Services Committee

March 9, 2021 • 2:45 p.m. • Pioneer Room

Natalie Wetzel

Chairman Weisz and members of the House Human Services Committee:

My name is Natalie Wetzel, and I am a Bismarck resident. My family and I have had end-of-life care experiences with my parents that have led to my support for SB 2226. This bill would allow the Department of Health to license residential end-of-life facilities in North Dakota.

Prior to my parents becoming sick, they told me and my siblings that they did not want to go to a nursing home. We were able to honor that request for my father, but not my mother. Unfortunately, both died in institutional settings – one in a nursing home and the other in the hospital. Our family would have benefited immensely from access to a residential end-of-life home.

My mother developed Alzheimer's and was cared for in the memory care unit of an assisted living facility. After becoming ill, she was no longer well enough to stay in the memory care unit. Her care required more than my siblings and I could provide at home, and we had to make the difficult decision of placing her in a nursing home. I remember our family staying in a room that was provided to us from the nursing home during her end-of-life journey. Although this room was larger than her normal nursing home room, I believe the chaos of everyone trying to fit into this area created a stressful environment for my mom in her last days. Additionally, it would have been a welcome relief to have an area that we could have rested, ate, showered, and had the ability to discuss what was occurring in private and not bothered her with noise and commotion of our activities.

My dad's cancer journey ended in his hospital room. He really wanted to be at home with the ability to go outside and get fresh air and have his family around him, but his care exceeded what my siblings and I could provide. During his last days we gathered in the one small waiting room down the hall from his at the hospital and took turns visiting his room.

There were too many of us to fit in the room at one time. To complicate matters, there were other families who also needed the waiting room, but only one family could utilize the room at a time. Family members slept while sitting straight up in the waiting room chairs. It was not a comfortable place to stay for days, but when you are in that situation you do not want to leave in case you miss your loved one's final moments.

Residential end-of-life homes would provide what is missing in North Dakota. Currently, families must choose from three options – die at home, in a hospital, or at a nursing home. Residential end-of-life facilities are staffed with a lower patient to caregiver ratio. And hospice providers can be selected and by the loved one and his or her family to provide hospice services. I believe a residential end-of-life home would have relieved a lot of stress and provided more dignity in my parents' final days. In addition, it would have provided a more homey, spacious, and comfortable place for my family members to stay during these stressful times.

The decisions that we needed to make during my parents' final days were challenging. Although I try take comfort in that we made the best decisions we could with the information we had at any given moment, it is still hard not to wonder if we made the right choices for my parents. If we could have somehow made their final days less stressful for them. Please pass Senate Bill 2226. Both of my parents would have preferred to remain in a calm, homey environment with enough space for our entire family to be present. Residential end-of-life homes need to be an option for North Dakotans who face this in the future.

Thank you, Chairman Weisz and the members of the House Human Services Committee for reading my testimony today.