

TESTIMONY

December 16th, 2009

My name is Miriam Smith. I'd like to thank you Mr. Chairman and the members of the committee for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of my parents who are both in a nursing facility. Our family's decision to place them in a nursing facility was not an easy decision, to say the least. My three siblings and I cared for my parents as long as we could at home. However, their health deteriorated to the point where we could no longer care for them in their home.

My mother is 88 years old and my father is 92 years old. They have been married 64 years. My mother suffered 3 strokes, one a bilateral stroke which left her without the ability to walk and she lost her peripheral vision. She is currently being fed through a feeding tube.

My father suffers from dementia and has congestive heart failure. He currently has aspiration pneumonia and was in intensive care for almost two weeks.

My father was a hard working, intelligent, witty man working in accounting most of his life. He also enjoyed preaching and preached at a local nursing home every Sunday for 25 years. Every Christmas he would make goodie bags for all the staff and residents of the nursing home. Our family would help him put the bags of grapes, apples and candy together and we would help him distribute them as well as sing Christmas carols.

He was diagnosed with dementia a little over a year ago and his health has deteriorated dramatically. He rarely remembers his four children and is starting to forget my mother. The man, who once was my protector, is now like a toddler, we have to make sure he is changed, fed, etc.

Unfortunately, like many families today we do not have the resources to keep my parents at home and provide them with patient, caring and compassionate caregivers.

Our families experience with nursing homes has been a beyond frustrating and an emotional rollercoaster ride to say the least.

In May of this year, my mother was transferred from the hospital to a nursing facility close to home. She was transferred to this facility because the facility the family had chosen had a waiting list and therefore it was recommended that she be placed here short term. She arrived there on Friday afternoon, the next morning, I arrived around 10 A.M. to find her in deplorable conditions. She was covered in vomit, had food lodged in her mouth which I had to remove by sticking my finger in her mouth and removing it. My mother was on a pureed diet due to her inability to swallow properly, however, they had attempted to feed her regular food and had left the food in her mouth and walked away. I cleaned her up as much as I could and called for the nurse. The nurse arrived and indicated that my mother was running a temperature and appeared to be dehydrated. She was not responsive and therefore the doctor was contacted. I asked if anyone had checked on her since breakfast (which I was told was served at 8 AM) and the nursing assistant indicated that she "forgot to check on her" she was very sorry. I also asked when the last time her blood sugar level was checked, since she is diabetic, I noticed was starting to sweat. I was told "it was early this morning". The nurse proceeded to check her level, which was very low. The nurse tried to give her orange juice but because she was not responsive she could not swallow the orange juice. The nurse, proceeded to open a packet of sugar and place the sugar in my mother's mouth. I questioned what she was doing and she indicated "Honey, I am not going to kill your mother" and laughed.

The ambulance arrived and my mother was taken to the hospital where she spent almost two weeks in intensive care. The doctor indicated that my mother was not able to swallow and therefore, the best solution would be to place a feeding tube. The nursing home director came to the hospital to speak with my sister while visiting my mother and asked her to give her another chance. The director indicated that they had "messed up" and to "please not report them." My sister told her that our main concern at the moment was to help my mother and that it was inappropriate for her to approach with such a request being that my mother could have died under their care.

My mother was released from the hospital to the nursing home our family had originally chosen. Although, she is in a "five

star" facility she has sustained unexplained injuries. My brother visits my parents several times a day and my sister is there throughout the week as well. I call the facility daily and visit them on the weekend and we all check both of my parents from head to toe on our visits.

Most of the staff has been very compassionate and truly care for not only my parents but also the other residents. They take the time to talk to the family and keep us updated on any changes in our parents' condition. Unfortunately, we have also witnessed less than desirable behavior from some staff. For example, a nurse assistant telling a blind resident "if you are not nice to me I will leave you standing right here in the middle of the hallway, I have done it before and I will do it again!".

My mother is now in hospice care. We have also received guidance to place my father in hospice care. We are awaiting the order from the doctor. The hospice staff has been very understanding and truly compassionate. We communicate on a daily basis and they have gone above and beyond their call of duty including calling us in the evenings to provide update status on my parents. The hospice staff has also provided support for our family by having us talk to the social worker and have provided us with a chaplain whom we can talk to about our parents' transition.

As I tell you their story, my heart aches for all my friends who are going through a similar experience with their parents, if not worse. Our roles have reversed and we are now the caregivers and our parents are "the toddlers". We now have the obligation to see that they are treated with dignity. To make sure their last days, no matter how many they have left, a day, a week, a month, in the most comfortable environment and the most competent medical attention possible.

We should care about eldercare as much as childcare; after all they both do not have a voice of their own. They need us to speak on their behalf.

As far as solutions for this critical matter, I believe the exceptional nurses should be rewarded and compensated accordingly. There should be unannounced inspections to nursing homes. When a nursing home is given a rating of 5 stars it should mean that they are truly a highly rated facility,

not only for the physical environment but also for the competent, meticulous medical attention, with top-notch bedside manner, internal and external patient/customer services.

There should also be mentors for the residents who do not have families who visit them. Establishing a mentor/mentee relationship, where the mentor can provide human interaction and communication with the residents. Our family has become an adoptive family to many of the residents in the facility where my parents reside. One particular resident runs up to me, every time I am there and she says "I heard your voice!" and she gives me a hug. Another resident indicated to me that he did not have a need to be in the nursing home, he owns a big house, and however, he does not want to be alone and enjoys the company of others at the nursing home.

Today I hope Mr. Chairman and this committee will have the courage to make the recommendations and see that they are implemented. Today I am here as my parents' voice. As a baby boomer, I fear that if changes are not made and implemented immediately, thousands of our generation will suffer unnecessarily in some of these so-called nursing facilities.

Again, I thank you for allowing me the time to share with you my family's journey.