

Testimony of the Alzheimer's Association Greater Maryland and National Capital Area Chapters
SB 47 - Health Facilities – Nursing Homes and Assisted Living Programs – Essential Caregivers
Position: Unfavorable

Chairwoman Kelley and Vice Chair Feldman

My name is Eric Colchamiro, and I am the Director of Government Affairs for the Alzheimer's Association in Maryland. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony about SB 47, legislation which requires each nursing home and assisted living program to establish certain policies and procedures authorizing indoor visitation from an essential caregiver and relating to the designation and use of an essential caregiver

As Maryland considers the appropriate policy to allow indoor visitation at nursing homes and assisted living facilities (particularly during a public health emergency), we are concerned about a potential “essential caregiver” category of visitors.

The Alzheimer's Association wants individuals at nursing homes and assisted living facilities to be able to see their loved ones; yet visitation policy must be centered around more frequent, rapid turnaround testing to effectively manage the spread of COVID-19 for the many individuals coming in and out of facilities daily.

The Essential Caregiver designation has had mixed results in jurisdictions where it has been adopted; for example, Minnesota introduced it in July 2020 without adequate regulations to protect the health and safety of individuals at nursing homes and assisted living facilities, and there was a spike in COVID-19 cases at these facilities three weeks later.

As Maryland continues to discuss infection control procedures—as evidenced by recent CMS inspections, and the resulting fines—how can we be certain that protocols will be enforced among caregivers entering these facilities? How can we know that caregivers are not usurping and interfering with the role of trained, experienced staff?

If this provision was to move forward, we would encourage that:

- Essential caregivers be required to provide results of a negative COVID-19 test conducted within the last 48 hours, along with being subjected to temperature screening, upon each entrance into a nursing home or assisted living facility;
- In addition, the Essential Caregiver should sign an attestation that they have isolated in the time between the testing sample was taken and the visit, and they are free from symptoms;
- **Clear guidelines must be established to guide what essential caregivers should be doing.** Essential caregivers should be a complement—and not a substitute—for trained, employed staff at nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Family caregivers should not be assisting with activities of daily living inside care facilities (staff are primarily responsible for this role); and

This bill notes the importance of better caregiving, and also alludes to the enormous challenge of social isolation; a challenge at long-term care facilities before, especially during, and after this pandemic. The Alzheimer's Association welcomes MDOA's Senior Call Check Program, and its new Share Your Life Stories, an initiative designed to address the issue of social isolation many older adults are experiencing as a result of COVID-19.

We would also welcome further investment by the State to help combat this epidemic of loneliness; the Alzheimer's Association's Florida chapters, in April of 2020, launched Project VITAL. This initiative, starting with 150 care communities, supplies tablets preloaded with software programming which enables residents to connect with their loved ones via video chat with a simple tap on the home screen.

We respectfully applaud the intention of this legislation, but oppose it as written.