

Testimony of the Alzheimer's Association Greater Maryland and National Capital Area Chapters
HB 276 – Congregate Care Facilities - Visitation
Position: Informational

Chair Pendergrass and Vice Chair Pena-Melnyk

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 on HB 276.

As a long-time, active member of Maryland's Oversight Committee for the Quality of Care in Nursing Homes, the Alzheimer's Association has long stressed the importance of protecting our most vulnerable Marylanders in long-term care facilities. Among all residential care facilities, including assisted living facilities, 42 percent have Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted these facilities; their workforce has risen to extraordinary challenges, and certain issues--such as visiting your loved ones--have risen to the forefront.

Visitation, during the pandemic, has been complicated. While our organization wants to encourage visitation, and addressing the social isolation among residents, we believe that it should be state guidance—and not a facility-level determination—which determines whether the presence of a particular visitor would endanger the health and safety of a resident.

We have appreciated strong, consistent, state-level guidance for visitation. This type of guidance, which states such as Colorado and Arizona promulgated at earlier stages in the pandemic, requires protocols such as: proof of a negative COVID-19 test conducted within 48 hours; signing an attestation that the visitor has quarantined between that test and visiting the facility; and other specific safety protocol.

We applaud this legislation's push for the use of video or audio calls, as an alternative to visitation. Social isolation is 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 thank the bill sponsor for this important legislation.