

Thank you, Senators, for having me here today to share my experiences as a frontline caregiver in the battle against COVID-19 in Pennsylvania nursing homes.

I'm Keshia Williams, and I have been a Certified Nursing Assistant since 2012. Before that I worked as a direct care worker in an assisted living facility, a medical assistant, phlebotomist and ekg tech. I have a passion for healthcare and for taking care of others. My testimony here today is another way I am helping others -- Because our nursing home system is broken. Our residents are suffering. Our caregivers are leaving the field. And if we don't change course, more people will die needlessly. And it's important for me to speak out.

In my years as a CNA, I have watched nursing home staffing get worse and worse. This work is not easy - it's physically demanding, mentally draining, and emotionally exhausting.

Imagine rushing from room to room to bathe, clothe and feed 15-20 people, many of whom cannot do anything themselves, in just a few hours. Now imagine you are also their support system. You are the person they rely on to socialize, listen, offer them comfort, tend to their needs and ease their fears. You are their family -- sometimes the only family they have -- and you grow to love them like your own grandmother and grandfather. Now imagine knowing they're in the final moments of their life. And you sit with them, hold their hand, take a moment of peace with them, and watch this person you've loved and cared for pass away.

Since COVID, our work has gotten even harder, as the pandemic laid bare the flaws and failures of Pennsylvania nursing homes. For decades, we sounded the alarm on chronic and dangerous understaffing and unacceptable conditions for workers and residents. We made do with dwindling resources and demanded lifesaving reform, while the industry increasingly focused on the bottom line, and rampant, unchecked nursing home sales to irresponsible owners drove down standards.

We have come to you - our elected leaders - again and again to provide testimony, yet the process of enacting change has been painstakingly slow. To make matters worse, employers often resist working alongside caregivers to tackle the growing challenges of caring for our seniors together.

PA has one of the worst COVID nursing home death rates in the entire country - over 13,000 nursing home residents have died and countless workers have fallen ill or lost their lives. As someone who lived through it, as a mother who needs to come home every night to take care of my two sons, I can tell you it's terrifying.

This work has been named the most dangerous job in the country. And yet on the whole we are paid poverty wages. We lack affordable healthcare. We do not have adequate

time off and even had to take our own time to quarantine. Once our days ran out, we had to choose between being safe or losing a paycheck. Our employers put a “Heroes” sign in front of our buildings yet we were disciplined for speaking out when we were told to reuse gowns and soiled masks.

I could say ‘the time for change is now’ but the truth is: The time for change was years ago. 13,000 of our seniors are dead because of delays, inaction, and misplaced priorities. Caregivers are leaving the bedside in droves because they cannot put in one more triple shift. They cannot break their backs at work all day and yet know it still wasn’t enough because their residents need and deserve better. They cannot spend their day off in line at a foodbank just to feed their kids. They cannot handle the emotional burden of this job when they can make more money down the street at a convenience store.

To fix this system we need:

- **Better staffing to save lives.** This means updating our state nursing home regulations, which haven’t been touched in 30 years. Right now in Pennsylvania, homes are only required to provide each resident with 2.7 hours of care a day. That’s less than three hours a day to bathe, clothe, feed, and care for your loved one. The AARP, federal government, and dozens of scholars and advocates agree the [minimum necessary](#) to provide patients with a safe environment and quality care is 4.1 hours per day. Pennsylvania should do no less.
- **Better jobs.** Achieving these standards will take an investment in nursing home jobs. Essential frontline workers are risking their lives and families while many are paid poverty wages, lack affordable healthcare, and don’t receive paid time off. If we want to provide our seniors with the care they need and ensure we have enough caregivers for our state’s rapidly-aging population, caregivers must receive a fair wage, affordable healthcare, paid time off, and a voice in the care they provide.
- **Protections when nursing homes are sold.** Nursing homes are being bought and sold at an alarming rate. Each time that happens, we see lower quality care and lower job standards. There must be transparency and accountability when nursing homes are sold so that residents, workers, and the public - whose tax dollars fund more than 70% of nursing home costs - are sure money is going to take care of our seniors, no to profits or CEO bonuses. Philadelphia City Council just passed a Transparency in Healthcare bill by a unanimous vote last week. The Commonwealth should follow their lead and pass similar legislation statewide.

This is not a job for just anyone. It takes special people to do this work and to do it well. We need to make sure the quality of the job reflects the level of skill and compassion it takes to do it. The crisis we are in will take all of us workers, elected leaders, and employers - to solve. We are ready. Are you?

Thank you.