

Testimony to the Ways and Means Committee, Health Subcommittee

“Examining the COVID-19 Nursing Home Crisis”

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My name is Melinda Haschak. I am a nursing home worker from Stamford, Connecticut. I’ve worked in the healthcare industry for over 20 years.

Most of my career has been in long term care — I began doing administrative work in the home care industry, then worked as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) for seven years, and have been a licensed practical nurse (LPN) for the last nineteen. I’m currently in the middle of studying to be a registered nurse, and I have a year and a half left before I graduate.

Though working to take care of my residents is very rewarding, my workplace can often be unnecessarily stressful and difficult. Just in the last three years that I’ve worked at my facility, we had 5 different administrators, all with different sets of policies. It made our lives hectic. So my coworkers and I decided enough was enough and we voted to unionize last year though are still fighting for our first contract.

Some of the things we asked for were our time and a half pay, holiday pay, tuition reimbursements, family-sustaining wages to help with short staffing and a training fund. We also wanted a more reasonable healthcare plan that we can include our families in. The pandemic has only deepened the need for what we are fighting for and made the problems that already existed worse.

After the pandemic, our workplace became even more stressful and difficult. My facility was hit hard by the PPE shortages. We were in such short supply, we were being told to reuse single-use gowns and masks. Just recently, the corporation that owns the facility where I work was fined for washing single-use suits instead of replacing them with new ones at another facility nearby.

It was so bad that I had to find PPE for myself and my co-workers using my own money and the help of friends and family members. I supplied 4,000 masks and other PPE to my facility with the help of my sister. I couldn’t bear to risk exposure to COVID-19 so recklessly.

But unfortunately, after luckily avoiding infection from my sister who tested positive at the early stages of the pandemic, I believe that I caught COVID-19 at work.

Once we started hearing of cases of COVID-19, our facility was still figuring out internal policy and best practices. While we did make an effort to quarantine our residents that tested positive for COVID-19, we were so short-staffed that staff worked in both quarantined and unquarantined areas daily. What's worse is that we weren't always told who had tested positive either, even though that information was known to parts of management.

Since my work involves being hands-on with residents, including being available for CPR during emergency situations, I unknowingly worked with residents that tested positive for COVID-19. Even with a gown and a surgical mask, I didn't have full protections like goggles for my eyes. This is how I believe I contracted COVID-19.

I continued to pass temperature checks throughout the pandemic until I started feeling slightly sick. At first, I thought it was just seasonal allergies but by the Friday before Mother's day, I felt horrible. I went to go get tested and my results came back positive for COVID-19.

I'm a single mother and I live in a home with my two teenage daughters and my sister. After I tested positive, I had to stay in complete isolation from them. I couldn't afford to get my kids sick, especially with one of my daughters who has asthma. That meant I couldn't give my children any affection, any hugs, or any kisses — when it was time to eat, I ate alone. My daughters had to figure out how to cook for themselves - it was so hard to not be able to support them. I couldn't touch my kids until my birthday.

Between self-isolation when my sister was ill and then contracting COVID-19 myself, I was out of work for almost a month. I had to use all my sick days, vacation days, and personal days in order to continue to receive pay. Now I can't afford to get sick because that would mean I couldn't provide for my family. As a worker who cares for vulnerable people, and risks my health to do it, I shouldn't have to be in this situation.

This whole process took a huge mental toll on me — there were many days I came home crying. Today, we continue to suffer from short staffing, I'm still being asked to work more than 40 hours, and we still do not have enough PPE. While I appreciate the donations of food and the occasional pizza party we receive, my co-workers and I don't need a pizza party, we need PPE.

And even after my co-workers and I continue to contract COVID-19, communication is still a problem we face. We still don't know which residents are infected. Even though there are "clean" zones and a COVID-19 wing, we fear that there could be potential exposure because of the lack of information and protocols keep changing.

That's why our initial contract fight for family-sustaining wages, tuition reimbursement, funding for training, and sufficient equipment is more important than ever. I love working with my residents because oftentimes I know it's the only family they have, so not only do I owe it to them, but I owe it to my own family and myself to hold these facilities accountable.