

Good morning Senators Osten, Abrams and Moore, and Representatives Walker, Steinberg and Abercrombie, and to the members of the Appropriations, Public Health and Human Services Committees. My name is Larry Santilli and I am the President of Athena Health Care Systems, a Connecticut-based company with nursing homes located in nearly every corner of our state and employing nearly 5,000 healthcare professionals. Below is a list of Athena centers and the towns in which they reside:

Abbott Terrace Health Center – Waterbury

Bayview Health Center- Waterford

Beacon Brook Health Center- Naugatuck

Cherry Brook Health Care Center – Canton

Countryside Manor of Bristol - Bristol

Crestfield Rehabilitation Center & Fenwood Manor – Manchester

Evergreen Health Care Center – Stafford Springs

Glastonbury Health Care Center – Glastonbury

Laurel Ridge Health Care Center – Ridgefield

Litchfield Woods Health Care Center – Torrington

Maefair Heath Care Center – Trumbull

MeadowBrook of Granby – Granby

Middlesex Health Care Center- Middlesex

Montowese Health & Rehabilitation Center- North Haven

Newtown Rehabilitation & Health Care Center – Newtown

Northbridge Health Care Center – Bridgeport

Shady Knoll Health Center – Seymour

Sharon Health Care Center – Sharon

Sheriden Wood Health Care Center – Bristol

The Summit At Plantsville – Plantsville

Valerie Manor – Torrington

Wadsworth Glen Health Care and Rehabilitation Center – Middletown

Thank you for scheduling this listening session and for including skilled nursing facility issues among the COVID-19 topics.

As this week will mark more than five months since Connecticut declared a public health emergency, Athena Health Care Systems is providing an update on the number of patients diagnosed with COVID-19 who have recovered while in our care and a brief overview of our response to the COVID-19 pandemic in our centers. As of the end of last week, 1,392 residents have recovered from COVID-19 in our centers, including more than 293 in our state-designated COVID-Recovery Centers.

As you are all aware, this pandemic has hit nursing homes particularly hard, but these recoveries offer a level of hope for our patients and their families. These recoveries are a testament to the skill and bravery of the aides, nurses, housekeeping staff, and everyone on our team who has shown up over the last five months during this unprecedented crisis. They are literally saving lives.

Even as states move forward with re-opening plans and skilled nursing homes have seen a significant decline in new positive cases, Athena's centers remain focused on protecting our staff and our residents from the coronavirus and doing all we can to help those who do contract the virus win the battle against it.

The coronavirus pandemic has hit nursing homes at a disproportionately higher rate than the greater community. The impact of this pandemic on nursing homes has been something facilities across the country are grappling with. We care deeply about our residents and are devastated by the loss of patients under our care and in nursing homes across the state. We mourn their loss and continue to offer our deepest condolences to their families.

Athena Health Care Systems welcomed and participated in the state's independent review of nursing homes' response during the pandemic. Our preparation and response were influenced not only by our state's efforts but also by the federal response, guidelines, and recommendations at the time, which evolved rapidly as science and new best practices were developed. We, too, are conducting a thorough review of our policies, procedures, and practices to better evaluate our centers and overall approach to this evolving pandemic - which we anticipate will increase again in the fall. Our goal is to take our lessons learned, as well as those learned by other providers, the state, and the CDC, and develop a comprehensive plan to address any second wave, armed with information and science that was not known to any of us when this pandemic broke.

As part of its work to battle the coronavirus, Athena Health Care Systems answered the call from the state of Connecticut to create and operate the state of Connecticut's only designated COVID-19 Recovery Centers, which cared for more than 300 patients. We hope the state will continue to see the lifesaving value and effectiveness of these centers and keep them available for a quick turnaround in the event of a fall resurgence of COVID-19.

The COVID-only treatment center model has been held up as the gold standard for care of certain patients with COVID-19, not only in CT but other states that used this model. The fact that Athena was asked to operate these centers speaks to the level of confidence state regulators have in our ability to do so safely. Because of this, I will focus my testimony on this aspect of our response to the pandemic.

Athena strongly recommends the state keep open/available the 250 beds at Westfield Speciality Care and Torrington Speciality Care for quick opening in the event of a resurgence. Furthermore, we should identify more locations throughout the state - ASAP - creating 1,200 beds strategically located throughout the state.

- Develop plans to implement and open COVID-Recovery Centers - quicker than initial centers.
- Athena has offered to manage them, or provide consultation if no other group is willing.
- Athena was the only group in the state to step-up to offer two of our centers, as well as managing the other two "pop-up" locations. Athena was an architect of these centers, working directly with the state DPH to develop.

They Work!!! According to our data, the centers have a 10:1 recovery rate versus 3:1 for conventional nursing homes. Additionally, the Recovery Centers save on healthcare systems' PPE burn rate. Furthermore, the Recovery Centers should be allowed to accept direct transfers of positive residents from other nursing homes and assisted livings, as well as hospitals. This will ease the burden on centers throughout the state and, most importantly, save lives.

Testing, testing, testing! We now know much more about the asymptomatic spread and understand the importance of testing patients and staff, not just those displaying signs and symptoms, as initial guidance from the state and CDC dictated. Immediate and ongoing testing would have allowed us to keep staff home, away from residents, and would have allowed us to better and proactively quarantine/cohort residents, as well as better utilize the PPE we had on hand.

We strongly encourage the state to continue providing testing for residents and staff. Under the current situation, it is not sustainable for nursing homes to pay for or organize this on their own.

Due to the restriction placed on visitations back in mid-March, our centers have worked on many fronts to accommodate and communicate with families.

Athena's Marketing & Communications Department issued weekly talking points for family conference calls and email blast topics with detailed and generic information for the center's weekly email to family members. These updates included new state and federal guidelines, which changed often, as well as suggestions for specific updates taking place at the center or how the new guidelines were being implemented at the "local level." Many centers took the opportunity to share anecdotes of recreation activities taking place and directed families to visit their Facebook page to see pictures or videos of the activities. Oftentimes, these posts went "viral," allowing others to see that compassionate care was still taking place and "healthcare heroes" were showing up every day to not only provide care, but to hold a hand, lend an empathetic ear, or a calming voice in these troubled times.

Many of the Facebook postings were shared and viewed by hundreds, and in some cases, thousands of people.

Conference calls, and when able, Zoom meetings were held weekly as well to provide additional updates to the weekly email blast and a Q&A session with the center's administrator and several department heads. While patient-specific questions were not addressed, these were calls that were used to provide updated cases counts, new procedures were shared, staffing updates, and more. These calls and weekly email blasts continue to this day.

Many centers solicited letter-writing campaigns in their communities, to both residents and staff as a means to reach and thank a "Healthcare Hero" or let residents know they are in the thoughts and prayers of their respective communities.

While "Window Visits" were taking place, many Athena centers were featured in local and even national news for their innovative ways of keeping families connected to their loved ones. From wedding anniversaries to birthday parties and just the opportunity to see each other, hundreds of such activities took place, whenever possible.

Every Athena center also implemented a new "Pop-Up" message directing website visitors to a Covid-19 informational "Landing Page" on their website. The pop-up provided an option to learn more about the center's COVID-19 plans and status or navigate to their website. Users who opted to visit the temporary landing page were directed to a page containing general information

about the center's planning and response, as well as useful links to state and federal agencies' official COVID-19 informational pages. Additionally, the COVID status, positive or negative was shared on this page.

At this point, every center has multiple iPads available in their center for communication between families and their loved ones. We promote this feature in emails, calls, and rounds with staff to encourage their use. We continue with Window Visits and socially distanced outside visits in our centers and will look to the state for their guidance on expanding visitation. We understand the importance of familial involvement at our centers with their loved ones and welcome any safe, additional accommodations that can be made at the earliest possible time. This is the number one concern we hear from our families.

Thank you for your time and I, or a member of the Athena Health Care Systems team, am willing and able to answer your questions.