

**TESTIMONY OF  
Melissa Putnam, Certified Nurse Aide  
Beverly Manor of Reading, Pennsylvania  
Member, SEIU Local 1199P**

My name is Melissa Putnam. I am a certified nurse aide at Beverly Manor in Reading, Pennsylvania. I have worked as a nurse aide for nine years and at Beverly Manor for the last six. I am also a member of the Service Employees International Union, Local 1199P. Our union represents more than 100,000 nursing home workers across the country. Chairman Grassley, and other members of this committee, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify.

I am horrified by the stories we have heard today about abuse and neglect of nursing home residents. I was drawn to nursing home work because I enjoy working with people. Interacting with the residents in my nursing home keeps me going. My days are filled with talking and joking with them. I care about them very much. I would never want any of them exposed to someone who had committed crimes in the past.

The problem that I see in nursing homes is that too many new workers are constantly coming in the door. Because the job is extremely taxing and the wages very low, it is hard to keep good committed workers. Let me explain to you what my typical day is like:

I work the day shift which starts at 7am and ends at 3pm. I usually have 13 to 15 residents to care for. During my eight hour shift I have to:

- Feed everyone breakfast, which takes up to 2 hours because I have to prepare everyone's meals and feed the 2 or 3 of them who can't feed themselves.
- Between 9am and 11am I do what I call AM care - that means bathing and dressing everyone and getting them ready for the day.
- Also, throughout the morning I take people to the bathroom, and turn and prop the sickest ones.
- Then I rush out for my lunch break and as soon as I come back it's time to serve people lunch which means getting some of them transported up to the dining room and helping others to eat in their room.
- Twice a day I drop everything and distribute nourishments - "Ensure" drinks - to about half my residents.
- I also have a list of people on the walking list. This means I have to spend 15 minutes each day with these residents helping them to walk or do passive range of motion activities.
- Every few minutes throughout the day I have to respond to a call bells or an alarms that we have on wheelchairs so people can remain restraint free.
- Finally, at the very end of the day I spend 1/2 hour doing my "bookwork." For each resident I must record how they are performing the activities of daily living or ADL's, which means tracking how much they ate, moved around, whether they had a bowel movement and other details.

As you can see, I have too much to do in too little time. I run myself ragged everyday and everyday I am frustrated because I know I should be doing more. I work as fast as I can but it is not physically possible to keep up with the demands on my time.

I stick with it because I like the residents. They tell me how much they like me and that I'm doing a good job and give me encouragement. Because we have a union, I also get paid more than the \$6 or \$7 dollars per hour that most nurse aides earn. At Beverly Manor, we don't have turnover rates over 100% like most non-union homes, but we still have constant staff changes. This means strangers coming in all the

time to care for the residents.

Recently, we have had problems with stealing. A VCR and other items disappeared and we suspect that someone on staff took them. Sometimes people come in, don't stay very long and then leave for unknown reasons. Recently I found out that one of the workers who left is in prison. That makes me very uncomfortable.

I don't want people like this coming into our home. But until working conditions improve there will be lots of people coming and going. Most people can't handle the stress I face everyday - they will find other work that's easier and pays more. A lot of people leave because the job is so dangerous. Workers hurt their backs when they try to lift residents alone because no one is around to help. It is no surprise that the injury rate for nursing home workers is higher than injury rates for coal miners, construction workers and people who work in steel mills.

Because of the problems keeping people on the job, I agree that nursing homes should be required to run criminal background checks on new applicants. We have such a law in Pennsylvania and to some degree this makes it easier for me to feel comfortable with the parade of new workers who rotate through the home where I work.

Criminal background checks can be a useful protection to weed out the wrong kind of people. If the federal government is going to require them, I urge you to avoid some of the mistakes we have made in Pennsylvania and to respect workers' rights.

I have three specific suggestions:

- First, nursing homes should be prohibited from passing on the cost of the checks to workers. In Pennsylvania, homes are charging applicants \$10-\$15 dollars for their own checks. If federal checks are also required the cost will be even greater. Asking the workers to pay is not fair. I know that if I was asked to pay \$20 or \$50 dollars up front it would have made me think twice before applying for this job.
- Second, there should be some kind of appeals process for people who believe that they have been wrongly accused of having a criminal background. In big systems like this there are always mistakes, and people should have some way of protecting themselves from being the victims of these mistakes.
- Finally, systems must be in place to process these checks quickly. In Pennsylvania it only takes about a week now to complete the checks. But if the scope of the check is broadened and the federal systems aren't ready to handle all these checks, it will take much longer. Workers should not have to linger for months on probationary status waiting for their checks to be completed. And residents should not be exposed on a long term basis to workers who have not been screened.

Let me sum up by saying that, on behalf of my co-workers at Beverly Manor and my union brothers and sisters at SEIU, I support criminal background checks for nursing home workers because I do not want to work beside criminals and I do not want the residents I care for to be in danger. I urge this committee to move forward on this issue.

As you are working on this issue, I urge not to forget about the root causes of these problems. Until nursing homes are adequately staffed, and workers are properly trained and fairly compensated, we will continue to have a revolving door workforce. High turnover rates compromise the quality of care and

leaves residents at risk of abuse or neglect. For the well being of the workers and the residents they serve, I urge you to also address these larger and more challenging issues.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.