

## Julie Simpkins Testimony

Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Braun, and members of the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, thank you for inviting me here today to be a part of this important discussion on assisted living, a topic that is near and dear to my heart. My name is Julie Simpkins, and I am the co-president and chief operating officer of Gardant Management Solutions, a provider that develops and operates senior living, assisted living, and memory care communities. We are the fifth largest assisted living provider in the country and have communities in five states – Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Maryland, and West Virginia.

I have dedicated most of my life to senior living, spending 30 years working primarily in assisted living. This is my calling, and I'd like to speak with you today about Gardant's unique model and share thoughts on how we can work together on important issues facing those who need and work in assisted living.

Gardant is uniquely focused on offering affordable assisted living to low-income seniors. Our company was founded in 1999 after the creation of the Illinois Supportive Living Program, a home- and community-based Medicaid waiver program. Now, as we have expanded into four other states, our commitment to serving this population remains. The majority of residents living in Gardant communities rely on Medicaid for their assisted living care through these waiver programs.

Gardant has been limited in where we can offer our services due to the variability with state Medicaid waiver programs. It depends on the availability of state programs, state reimbursement levels, and the number of available waiver spots. Offering affordable assisted living exclusively – or even for a majority of residents like Gardant – requires an entirely different business model altogether. We have had to persistently seek out HUD loans and income tax credits to stay viable. Therefore, we fully support efforts to make long term care, including assisted living, more affordable to low- and middle-income seniors. With a rapidly growing elderly population, we need a public and private partnership to incentivize more providers to develop these models.

When we talk about assisted living, it's important to note that every state, every facility, and every resident is different. Efforts to standardize all assisted living communities would be both unworkable and irresponsible for resident care. State regulations appropriately recognize the diversity within assisted living while holding our profession accountable, and they are consistently updated to reflect the evolving nature of our sector and our residents.

Meanwhile, Gardant is committed to exceeding state requirements when we believe it is in the best interest of our residents. Take memory care as an example, and something that is top of mind for this committee as well as our residents and families. Every staff member at Gardant managed memory care communities receive education and training in dementia and related diseases as well as training as a Certified Dementia Practitioner training. While elopements are rare, we overreport any to the state immediately – even something as technical as a resident walking out the door and instantly returning after a staff member sees them. We know they didn't leave our facility and our staff immediately addressed the situation, but we still report it.

The recent reports of resident elopements that were ultimately fatal are heartbreaking, and my thoughts and prayers go out to the loved ones of those residents. I serve in leadership positions on numerous national organizations dedicated to long term care, and I know these tragic incidents are extremely rare and

not indicative of the assisted living experience. The overwhelming majority of families and residents have a life-affirming, safe experience. Assisted living providers are committed to upholding our policies and procedures, as well as continuing to learn all that we can about dementia care to prevent these incidents. It is critical that policies and regulations help protect residents while still supporting freedom of movement and independence for residents living with dementia.

Assisted living is a critical aspect of the long term care continuum, dedicated to delivering person-centered care to our nation's seniors. We need collaborative, comprehensive solutions that help ensure our ability, as assisted living communities, to continue doing what we do best – providing safe, quality care to our residents. From expanding more affordable long term care options, to workforce programs to address the growing caregiver shortage, these efforts could make a real difference. We must all work together to ensure every current and future assisted living resident is seen, safe, and served to enjoy the highest quality of life possible.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to answering your questions today.

###