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Testimony

Senate Majority Policy Committee

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Pennsylvania Homecare Association

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Good Afternoon,

Chairman Laughlin, and members of the committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you and address Rural Health Care in Pennsylvania.

My name is Geoff Gehring, and I am the Vice President of Redstone@Home. We provide home health, hospice & palliative, and home care services to individuals in their homes. Redstone@Home strives to provide seniors in Westmoreland County and the surrounding communities with the best possible assistance whether it be to achieve the activities of daily living or to meet complex medical needs. Offering services at home helps Redstone Presbyterian SeniorCare to broaden our mission and help seniors age in place. I am also a member of the Pennsylvania Homecare Association (PHA), a statewide membership association representing more than 700 organizations that bring medical care, personal care, and end-of-life care into thousands of people's homes every day across the Commonwealth.

Providing home health, home care, and home hospice services that are accessible for Pennsylvania's consumers in rural areas is challenging. This challenge stems from various factors, including limited access to care and services, difficulties in recruiting and retaining a sustainable workforce, and transportation-related hurdles. In my testimony today, I will address these multifaceted challenges that impede sustainable healthcare in home-based settings in rural areas.

In the rural regions of our state, accessing specialized healthcare remains a challenge for many of our program participants. The scarcity of specialists, such as dermatologists and orthopedic practitioners, results in infrequent or even nonexistent visits. Compounded by the absence of grocery and essential item delivery services, particularly for those who are isolated and lack informal support systems, participants rely heavily on caregivers.

Staffing shortages exacerbate these challenges, with fewer individuals opting for caregiving roles. The primary challenge as it relates to homecare and home health services is retaining workers in a field with an average turnover rate of 40 to 60 percent each year and providing sufficient pay and training. America is facing a shortage of in-home caregiving aides and nurses. Our aging population, in general, wants to age in place and preferably avoid nursing homes when possible, which means in-home caregivers are in high demand, whether paid directly by clients or through long-term care insurance, nonprofit organizations, state funding or government programs such as Medicaid.

The problem as it relates to Medicaid specifically is without the necessary funding, home-based care providers cannot compete in the marketplace for qualified employees because they cannot offer competitive wages. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics the median hourly wage for a direct care worker is \$13.35, this includes private pay wages. Paying workers a competitive wage is even more of a challenge for providers who provide care to non-Medicaid recipients because Medicaid-enrolled providers are unable to pass costs through to their consumers and patients. They must rely on Medicaid Fee-for-Service rates which in Pennsylvania are insufficient as home and community-based services have been underfunded for more than a decade.

Further compounding the problem is the simple fact that in rural areas there are less people and a smaller pool of candidates. The surge in warehouse job opportunities across numerous rural communities presents a distinctive challenge, as these positions frequently offer more competitive wages, attracting residents away from caregiving roles. While the phenomenon of losing caregivers to better-paying jobs is not exclusive to rural areas, the impact is heightened due to the scarcity of workforce.

Similarly, in areas like Perry County, where a significant portion of the population commutes to larger cities like Harrisburg for employment, the choice between warehouse jobs and caregiving roles becomes a pivotal factor in shaping local employment dynamics. As individuals gravitate towards warehouses or urban opportunities, caregiving positions struggle to attract and retain dedicated personnel.

The transportation dilemma further exacerbates the problem. In rural areas, the absence of public transit creates a significant challenge for individuals seeking healthcare access. While Medicaid transport can be an available option, it is not always available. Also, it is frequently perceived as undesirable by participants due to long waiting times both before and post appointment. Participants also report it can be unreliable, resulting in a heavy reliance on caregivers for mobility support. This transportation support is not reimbursed separately for the home and community-based provider. Furthermore, if a caregiver needs to accompany the patient, they encounter restrictions preventing them from staying for the visit and subsequently billing for their assistance, causing reimbursement issues within the healthcare support system.

Additionally, the vast distances in rural areas can make transportation to and from work locations more complex, discouraging the direct care workforce from the industry. Caregivers may spend considerable time and effort commuting between locations, affecting the efficiency of care provision. For example, it simply is not attractive to travel 30 minutes for a 2 hour shift at the current price of gas. Unfortunately, the reimbursement policy for caregiver mileage, though available, is cost-prohibitive, creating an additional layer of complexity and making it challenging for home care providers to operate profitably. The lack of reliable transportation also becomes a significant barrier, preventing participants from attending medical appointments due to the absence of viable means of transportation.

In summary, home-based care plays a vital role in the healthcare continuum, catering to the needs of hundreds of thousands of vulnerable individuals in Pennsylvania. Proper funding for home care and home health providers is essential to ensuring the well-being of both providers and their consumers. To address the caregiver shortage, it is imperative to explore incentives that encourage individuals to take on caregiving roles, particularly in rural areas where there is a notable deficit in direct care workers to meet authorized hours. The current situation is unsustainable, and providers require adequate resources through well-funded Medicaid programs to offer competitive wages. It is crucial that Pennsylvania's elderly and disabled population, who rely on this essential care, receive high-quality services in the comfort of their homes, and those providing this crucial care deserve fair compensation.

We stand ready to work with legislators and the administration to ensure the viability and longevity of home-based care for all Pennsylvanians.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.