



Hello, my name is Austin Blilie. I'm the Vice President of Operations with Mission Health Communities, at our New Hope, MN location.

North Ridge Health and Rehab is the largest skilled nursing home in the state of Minnesota and employs over 400 dedicated experience skilled nursing professionals.

Our lives were forever changed by the pandemic. Some industries were successful by working remotely, however our residents needed continued in-person care – our model **never wavered**. Staff showed up to take care of our residents no matter what the threat of the unknown.

As I reflect on the past 18 months at the very start of the COVID-19 pandemic, my initial thoughts immediately go to our residents and our health care staff. Most long-term care employees stepped up to the plate to take care of residents and attempt to keep families informed of the constant changes - as we began to see the number of cases climb throughout Minnesota.

They set aside their fear of contracting the virus to do what's right and take care of frail clinically complex residents. Long-term care staff are truly heroes; showing up when many others found themselves with jobs at home or utilizing government assistance to stay at home with their families.

Many of us had to sacrifice our personal lives while juggling the many residents specific and regulatory priorities of the pandemic. Work life balance never was more challenged. Our roles as mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, sisters, and brothers still remained a priority. And certainly, added a level of stress as we continued to sustain one of the most high-profile healthcare environments, all the while with added scrutiny from the federal government to the local news.

As we were dealing with the additional stressors such as a child learning at home, a spouse who may have lost their job, or caring for that family member who needed extra help ... the uncertainty was not only inside our care communities, but it was also waiting at home – and you can imagine that additional layer of stress. Despite it all, skilled nursing staff came to work to take care of the residents.

In the beginning of the Pandemic, there was so much fear of the unknown. The lack of durable PPE, the lack of federal/state guidance for long term care settings, and our most valuable resource, our staff, was scared.

With that said, long term care has traditionally faced ongoing staffing challenges – during the pandemic that often meant that employees spent the past 18 months picking up extra shifts and doing what they needed to do to take care of our residents. Being physically present at work meant their families and their own personal health was at risk - and of course, this risk continues today as the pandemic wears on. It is of utmost importance to recognize this special work lead by of our long-term care staff.

During the pandemic, it was extremely heartbreaking to see several of our residents' health deteriorate rapidly as COVID took over their body. Due to our visitor restrictions, many of these residents didn't have a family member or loved one beside them during their final moments.

As health care workers, we did everything we could to fill that void. We had staff that would sit at the resident's side while on the phone or a video call with their family. The long-term care nurse, nursing assistant, activities and social work assistants, housekeeping and maintenance staff became a critical lifeline for our residents as surrogate family members. These residents were scared, our staff were scared, but we, as a profession showed up to take care of the residents.

Things have gotten much better since the vaccine has become widely available, but our health care staff continues to wear layers upon layers of personal protective equipment daily, we continue to follow strict testing guidelines and continue to feel the daily stress the pandemic has created in its wide and lasting wake.

The experiences and memories that long-term care staff have from these past 18 months, will stick with all of us for the rest of our lives. These kind, hardworking, undaunted men and women are truly heroes. They are brave and courageous in

the face of the unknown, sacrificing their own lives for the safety and comfort of our residents. They are health care heroes and never stopped caring for residents by ensuring the human element never was lost.

I believe that caring for seniors is a calling.

Recognizing the work of our long-term care employees is critical to the future of senior care. It is imperative that the profession be supported by all of us. I thank the committee for this opportunity to speak with you today. By deciding to fund the senior living profession, you continue to support many seniors in need of professional care provided by exceptional professionals. Thank you!