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**Subject:** H742 implications for essential employers

Greetings Sen. Ashe and Sen. Balint,

I am writing in my capacity as CEO at Wake Robin in Shelburne, a continuing care retirement community for over 350 older adults. In addition to 250 independent living homes, we also have a health center that provides residential care, skilled nursing care and memory care to approximately 72 seniors. We are considered an essential employer and are always hiring. We have 219 employees (190 FTEs) including housekeepers, maintenance, security, dining staff (cooks, wait staff, etc.) LNAs, LPNs, RNs. As an 24/7/365 employer, we provide generous CTO that includes sick, vacation and holiday pay, health insurance, retirement, transportation supports, short and long term disability, life insurance, tuition reimbursement and scholarships, access to emergency loans. We have an onsite resource coordinator through United Way of Northwest Vermont's Working Bridges program that assists employees with any and all barriers to getting to work, staying at work and advancing at work. Bottom line, I think we are a great employer.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, hiring in Vermont for low-moderate wage positions was challenging. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, our recruitment and hiring has virtually stopped, especially now with the Stay at Home order. So it is vitally important for us to retain the workforce we have. The H742 allowance for employees to voluntarily resign from a job for the reasons stated in the legislation, and collect unemployment PLUS the \$600/wk. added benefit provided by the federal government could **decimate** our workforce. **Every single position we have, except RNs, some managers and my leadership team, would have a higher gross income by resigning and going on unemployment than staying working at Wake Robin. Our wages range from \$12.40/hr to \$24/hr for the positions I am referring to.** I can provide you the wage details if that would be helpful. But suffice to say, as an essential employer, we are **extremely concerned** about how we would continue to provide the care we are providing to our residents, especially those most vulnerable in our health center, if we lose our workforce. I assume we are not alone in this concern.

I completely understand and appreciate the legislature's intent to help workers who have lost their jobs due to this pandemic. But we already can't find enough workers, and our workplace is certainly one that has a higher likelihood of exposing staff to COVID. One of the allowances to resign voluntarily in H742 is "An unreasonable risk that the individual could be exposed to or become infected with COVID-19 at the individual's place of employment;" If the employer is not following the OSHA guidelines for keeping employees "safe", the employees can resign voluntarily and receive unemployment benefits. The safety protocols outlined by OSHA for medium to very high risk workplaces requires that employers provide Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). And there is an **extreme** shortage of PPE in the state and the country. Even though we want to provide an N95 mask to every employee, we simply don't have them. We currently only have enough N95 masks to last caring for 2 COVID patients for 30 days. If we had 3 COVID patients, our supply would diminish more rapidly. We don't have enough surgical masks to provide to staff. Those too are being rationed. We received 500 from the State and very generously received 300 from a local dentist. But giving that limited supply to all 219 staff would last us under 4 days. Today we will start providing employees with handmade cloth masks sewn by residents and friends. These in no way can be considered PPE, but they are better than nothing. We have no ability to transfer patients to the hospital for almost any except extreme acute reasons (heart attack) and are being asked to provide care at Wake Robin for any COVID patient. So we are especially careful about using the limited PPE we have right now for other respiratory (RSV, pneumonia, flu) illnesses.

So what am I asking of the Legislature? We feel it's unfair to exclude employees at essential workplaces from these unemployment benefits. But we desperately need them to stay working. So, as a colleague shared with me today, if this is a war, can the State find a way to support it's warriors? Could we create an essential worker "GI" bill that could add long term incentives to continue to work as well as hope for the future?

For example:

- Provide a pay incentive **to stay** at work
- Forgive school loans for all essential workers who continue to work at moderate or high risk essential workplaces

- Create grants and scholarships at tech and BA programs for the children of essential workers
- Cover the child care expense for essential workers

I'd be happy to discuss these and any other ideas that come forward with you. Please know how much I appreciate all you are doing to support our most vulnerable during these unprecedented times. But there really must be a remedy for the impact of H742 on essential employers or I fear these essential services will be without workers to provide them. That would be more challenging than we could imagine.

Respectfully,  
Martha Maksym

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