

Testimony before the Senate Special Committee on Aging  
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Good morning. I would like to thank Senator Casey, Chairman Kohl, Ranking Member Smith, and the other members of the Committee for their kind invitation to appear before you this morning, and to tell you about my experiences as a Green House Shahbaz. It is a privilege and an honor to share that story with you.

This year marks my 30<sup>th</sup> year as a nursing assistant. Like many of my colleagues, I became a nursing assistant because I needed a job, and it turned into a life-long calling. I have worked in a variety of facilities, both personal care homes and nursing homes, and in both for-profit and non-profit settings. For the last twelve years I have had the good fortune to be employed as a Certified Nursing Assistant in the skilled nursing center of the Lebanon Valley Brethren Home in Palmyra, PA. Despite the negative feelings that most people have about nursing homes, I have found it personally rewarding to be helpful to the residents and family members that I have cared for.

I have always felt that the care provided by myself and the rest of the staff of the Lebanon Valley Brethren Home was of the highest quality. Our residents were clean, well-tended, and well-fed. Still, there was something missing that I could not put my finger on. Looking back on it, now, I realize that while we offered our residents excellent nursing care, that did not always translate into a high quality of life.

A Certified Nursing Assistant in a traditional nursing home is a very busy person. We typically are assigned full responsibility for the total care of seven, eight or even more elderly residents for our eight-hour shift. These residents are usually very frail. Many of them are incontinent, and many of them have dementia. The work day feels very much like working on an assembly line, as we progress nonstop through a series of tasks such as giving baths, changing bed sheets, providing assistance at mealtimes, pushing wheelchairs, and dressing and re-dressing our assigned residents. If we manage to finish all the care routines, there is still the paperwork challenge of documenting all of our actions in the medical records.

When The Green House® concept was first introduced by my employer, I was very skeptical. After nearly 30 years as a nursing assistant, it was difficult to think about

providing care in a new way. Still, the description of The Green House lifestyle was very appealing. I decided to apply for a Shahbaz position, and was fortunate to be selected as one of the first Shahbazim to be trained. The training lasted three full weeks, and included one full week of instruction in cooking skills by a chef from a local community college.

It has now been nine months since my House, the Hostetter House, first opened its doors. The ten elders who live in my House were transferred from the existing nursing units at the Brethren Home, and so I already knew many of them. I cannot believe how much better they are all doing in The Green House setting. The most noticeable improvement I have witnessed is in the amount of socialization that occurs in our House. Several of my elders were hardly ever out of their rooms in the traditional nursing units; now they are frequently seen chatting in the living room, out on the patio, or lingering at the dinner table. Even the elders who have dementia are engaged in the activities and conversations around them, though they clearly don't understand everything that is going on. The second biggest improvement is in the dining experience. Every meal is home-cooked in our open kitchen, and the elders experience all the smells and sights of the meal preparation; they really chow down by the time the meal is served! When we first moved into the House, about four of my ladies were receiving daily nutritional supplements, like Ensure, because of their poor eating habits; after a few months in our House, those supplements were discontinued because everybody was gaining weight.

One of the things that I now realize was missing in the traditional nursing home was the ability to make choices. Our residents were given very few opportunities to make choices that were important to them. Breakfast was served by 6:30 AM, so most of the residents were awakened by staff at 5:45 AM. Activities, mostly for large groups of residents, were organized around regular calendar times and days. All that is different in our Green Houses! We no longer 'awaken' our elders, we wait for them to get up when they want to. Some of my elders are still early risers, but others can often be found sleeping until 10 AM or even later. We make them breakfast when they get up, whether that's 6 AM or 10 AM. As for activities, they all pretty much do what they want. Sophie likes to do puzzles by the fireplace, George watches TV in his room or entertains the ladies with tales of his WW2 adventures, Bill putters on the patio with gardening. Gertrude loves to play with our newest toy, a Nintendo Wii game system that simulates the bowling games she played all of her life. Occasionally, our elders will go 'visiting' at the Castagna House across the street to play Bingo with those elders.

We hold meetings with The Green House elders on a regular basis to talk about how things are going, and to offer them more choices about their daily lives. One of the more popular customs that has evolved is the elder's option to choose the menu (and dessert) on their birthday. This is something that we couldn't do in the traditional nursing home

because of the large numbers of residents, but it is relatively easy to do when you are only caring for ten elders.

One of the neat things about being a Shahbaz is that we get to make a lot of the decisions about how our House operates. For example, in the traditional nursing home the dining tables were often pre-set (for greater efficiency) by the dietary staff. When a resident came to the table, their appetizer, drinks, and dessert were already at their place setting. In actual practice, this didn't work very well because many residents would eat their dessert immediately and then refuse the rest of the meal. When we opened the Hostetter House we continued this same practice because it was the way we had always done it. Eventually we experimented with holding the dessert back until later in the meal; this has worked great because the elders now eat the healthy part of the meal first. The Shahbazim in our House also discovered that if we delayed the dessert service a bit, the elders filled the time delay by starting conversations with their neighbors. More socialization!

I can honestly say that I love being a Shahbaz, and so do my fellow Shahbazim. We have not had a single Shahbaz resign in the nine months that our Houses have been open. This is a big improvement over my facility's 23% annual turnover rate for nursing assistants, and an even bigger improvement over the national turnover rate for nursing assistants, which I understand to be slightly over 70% per year. [Source: American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, Washington, DC] The working life we now enjoy is very demanding, because we do cooking, cleaning and activities in addition to nursing care, but it is so much more fulfilling. I no longer feel like I am working on an assembly line. There are two Shahbazim on my shift for just ten elders, so we feel like there is plenty of time to provide all the care that is needed. We are now able to do all of the "extras" that we rarely had time for in the traditional nursing home. We can let an elder linger in a luxurious whirlpool bath because there is no time pressure to get onto the next bath. We can sit with the ladies and do manicures, or just chat on the patio with them while enjoying afternoon iced teas.

One of the great things about our Green House® homes is the consistency of staffing. I always work in the Hostetter House, and so the elders feel very secure and comfortable because they know me and I know them. This helps to provide better care. A few of my elders were chronically incontinent in the traditional nursing home, but now they are mostly or completely continent. We know them so well that we can anticipate their individual toileting needs, and it is certainly a lot easier and more dignified to take an elder to the bathroom before they have an episode of incontinence. This same familiarity helps in dining, as well, as we get to know their personal food preferences and dietary restrictions.

I often think about an elder in my House who has since passed on. This gentleman and his wife were both elders in the Hostetter House, and they shared adjoining rooms. Though he was terminally ill with cancer, the gentleman was always more concerned with his wife's welfare than with his own. Over many decades of marriage, he had always taken great care to make sure that his sleeping wife had a covering blanket on her to keep her warm. When this couple was in our traditional nursing unit, the husband always worried that the staff would forget the covering blanket, and sometimes they did because the staff changed regularly and not everyone knew the ritual. After a short time in our Green House, we realized how important the covering blanket was to Mr. P and we never forgot it. I believe it gave him great peace to know that we would care for his wife in that same attentive way after he was gone.

The living conditions in our Green House® homes are so much better than in the traditional nursing home units. It is much calmer because you don't have the background noises of intercom announcements and call bell alarms to deal with. There are no medication carts, laundry carts, housekeeping carts, or food carts to obstruct the walking paths for our elders. There is no gathering of wheelchairs around a crowded nursing station. Our elders now congregate in front of the fireplace, or out on the patio. The beauticians and physical therapists come to our House to conveniently provide their services. On occasion, our elders will choose to be transported to the campus Community Center for a worship service, concert, or important meeting.

The Green House® homes have also been very popular with the families of the elders. In my opinion, they seem happier because they see that their loved ones are happier. The family members get involved in the life of the House, as there are more things that they can do in a Green House home. They help set the table, participate in activities, bring in DVD's for everyone to watch, and sometimes take drink orders for anyone sitting in the living room area. From time to time, they stay to enjoy a meal with their loved one. Some of them bring their dogs in for an occasional visit.

In conclusion, I feel very lucky to be a Shahbaz and to work in a Green House home. In talking with many of my fellow Shahbazim, we all agree that we feel "spoiled" by our Green House experiences...in the sense that none of us would ever want to go back to working in a traditional nursing home again. As part of our initial Shahbaz training, we collectively composed a "Shahbazim Code of Ethics" to guide our behavior, and to set a measuring stick for holding one another accountable to the Green House principals. The first two principals are: (1) We will keep the Elder at the center of the home, and (2) We will protect, sustain, and nurture our Elders and each other. If we can keep to these principals, our Elders and The Green House homes will both flourish.

Senator Casey, other members of the Committee, and your staff, I encourage all of you to personally visit a Green House and see firsthand what a difference it is making in the lives of its resident elders. With Green Houses, seeing is believing. I hope, too, that this Committee will do what it can to support efforts that put elders at the center of their own care, and give them the opportunity to maintain a high quality of life.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to present this testimony.

[ATTACHMENT]

## Lebanon Valley Brethren Home

### Shahbazim Code of Ethics

- *We will keep the Elder at the center of the home.*
- *We will protect, sustain, and nurture our Elders and each other.*
- *We will maintain standards of excellence regarding Elders and decision making.*
- *We will show dignity, compassion, respect, and patience towards all.*
- *We will minister individual physical, spiritual, emotional and social needs under our care.*
- *We as a team will contribute to the goal of providing the highest quality of care.*
- *We will continue to learn and grow.*
- *We will monitor ourselves and others to prevent Institutional Creep.*
- *We will carry ourselves with a positive and professional attitude.*
- *We will be accommodating and flexible towards each other, our Elders and their families.*
- *We will be sincere in engaging in a life worth living.*
- *We will be punctual in arriving at work and reliable in completing our tasks as assigned.*
- *We will be truthful and honest in our interactions with one another.*
- *We will practice effective communication with each other, our Elders and their families.*