



**To:** Senator André Jacque, Chair  
Members, Senate Committee on Human Services, Children & Families

**From:** Michael Pochowski, CEO

**Date:** Thursday, January 21, 2021

**Re: Testimony on Senate Bill 5  
Request amendment to exempt assisted living providers**

On behalf of the members of the Wisconsin Assisted Living Association (WALA), I respectfully ask the members of the Senate Committee to consider providing an exemption for assisted living providers in 2021 Senate Bill 5.

WALA members understand the intention of these legislative proposals. And, while it is not the expectation that all assisted living providers would implement such policies, they are nonetheless effective operational instruments that should be available to assisted living providers in their mission to care for and protect the vulnerable population served - the elderly and persons with disabilities.

I imagine members of the committee understand the calculus of why assisted living residents and staff are considered one of the highest priorities in both federal and state vaccination plans, "Phase 1a". The vaccination of residents and staff will undoubtedly save lives as that population served is considered one of the most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Nationally, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the risk for severe illness with COVID-19 increases with age, with older adults at highest risk.<sup>1</sup> Severe illness means that a person with COVID-19 may require: hospitalization, intensive care, a ventilator to help them breathe, or they may even die. That is why people at increased risk, and those who are in continual contact with them, need to take special precautions to protect themselves and the elderly and disabled residents they serve.

Further, the CDC reports that eight (8) out of ten (10) COVID-19 deaths reported in the United States have been adults 65-years old and older. Compared to younger adults, older adults are more likely to require hospitalization or die if they get COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> In Wisconsin, the Department of Health Services (DHS) specifies that of the reported COVID-19 deaths, 79% are aged 60 and older.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Centers for Disease Control & Prevention: COVID-19: Older Adults](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Centers for Disease Control & Prevention: COVID-19: Older Adults](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/deaths.htm#demographics>

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated what was already a caregiver shortage crisis in the assisted living profession.

As an example, when an employee tests positive or exhibits signs/symptoms of COVID-19, they are unable to return to work for 10-days.<sup>4</sup> And, to further complicate matters, when infection is identified, often more than one staff member or resident will likely test positive.

COVID-19 infections place enormous stress on providers in their ability to serve residents and maintain sufficient staffing levels to ensure quality care and health outcomes. This is in addition to a time when most providers already face difficulty recruiting and retaining caregivers regardless of COVID-19.

Therefore, assisted living providers may determine that having staff vaccinated would not only ease caregiver shortages but also provide a facility-wide immunity level that will considerably reduce the probability of serious illness and/or death.

The Wisconsin Assisted Living Association, based upon the data and points presented, believes it is important that assisted living providers are allowed flexibility to access such policy tools – in the effort to protect the vulnerable population served and, improve healthcare outcomes.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me at:

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#### **About the Wisconsin Assisted Living Association (WALA)**

*The Wisconsin Assisted Living Association is comprised of approximately 1,500 facility members that serve the frail elderly and persons with intellectual and cognitive disabilities who are highly susceptible to COVID-19. This includes community-based residential facilities (CBRFs), residential care apartment complexes (RCACs), and adult family homes (AFHs), both licensed and certified. Our members serve over 20,000 residents and employ tens of thousands of employees.*

*The Wisconsin Assisted Living Association's mission is to support providers in enhancing the best quality of life for residents in assisted living in Wisconsin through advocacy, education, communication, and quality initiatives.*

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<sup>4</sup> [\*DHS: Preventing & Managing COVID-19 Outbreaks in Assisted Living Facilities & Skilled Nursing Facilities \(1/2021\).\*](#)