

TO: Rep. Fred Patton, Chair  
House Judiciary Committee

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SUBJECT: Testimony in support of HB 2620

DATE: February 10, 2022

Chairman Patton and members of the committee, thank you for allowing Ascension Via Christi to provide this testimony in support of HB 2620, which will strengthen the criminal penalties for interfering with, and causing physical harm to our state's healthcare workers.

For more than 130 years Ascension Via Christi has served members of the Kansas community, and is the largest provider of healthcare services throughout Wichita and central Kansas including hospitals, doctors and specialty clinics. As one of the leading non-profit and Catholic health systems in the U.S., Ascension is committed to delivering compassionate, personalized care to all, with special attention to persons living in poverty and those most vulnerable.

Nationwide, instances of workplace violence against nurses and other healthcare support staff have escalated at an alarming rate over the past several years. These incidents are occurring in emergency departments, inpatient units, same day surgery centers, primary care, long-term care, and employer-based clinics. According to a report published by the American Nurses Association, one in four nurses is assaulted on the job. Studies indicate that the majority of assaults on nurses are not reported, creating a "silent epidemic" as all too often they are viewed as part of the job.

Now let me tell you as a nursing leader what I witness on nearly a daily basis. It is not uncommon for our Ascension health care workers to face being bitten, punched, kicked or aggressively beaten to the point of inducing seizure activity and requiring hospitalization. After such attacks by patients many of these health care workers develop fear of returning to the work environment. This is because there is little action that is taken by our legal system to hold these individuals accountable. Hospital workers know that when crimes like this are committed, police officers and the judicial

system have little ability to detain and charge the perpetrator with criminal acts. If charges are pressed they frequently are dropped or dismissed.

If the perpetrator is taken into custody by law enforcement, they are typically released within hours simply to return to the same hospital where they committed the act. They seek care once again from the same associate that the patient previously attacked.

In one recent situation in our facility a female patient was being cared for in an inpatient unit. This patient had received care at many different health facilities and was evicted for violent acts towards care providers. State hospitals have denied services stating that they are not equipped to meet the needs of the patient. This patient was walking in the hall of the patient care unit when she passed one of our social workers. It can be observed on video camera recordings that the patient, unprovoked, turns and lifts up the social worker, tips her upside down, and drops her, slamming her head into floor.

Charges were pressed against this patient, and she was arrested. She returned to the same hospital within hours and was placed back in the care of the same workers.

This is just one event of many that I can share. It is not uncommon for me to have conversations with associates who tearfully turn in resignations stating they can no longer care of any patients because of the acts they have either personally experienced or have witnessed their co-workers experience. Some physicians have shared these symptoms resemble that of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Our staff works day and night for the betterment of the community and struggles with burnout. The additional safety challenges they face make it that much more challenging to recruit and retain healthcare staff to care for our community. This proposed legislation will send a powerful message that our state is serious about protecting our healthcare heroes and help empower them to report these incidents.

In closing, thank you for allowing me to share this testimony, and I ask that you support the passage of HB 2620.