



TO: Rep Patton, Chair
House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Tammy Northrop
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St. Joseph Campus
Ascension Via Christi Hospitals Wichita

SUBJECT: Testimony in support of HB 2023

DATE: January 23, 2023

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Tammy Northrop and I am from Wichita. I am a registered nurse and the director of emergency services at Ascension Via Christi St. Joseph. I am here today to share with all of you my personal experience from nearly two decades of patient care on the front lines and how we are dealing with daily effects of violence against our health care workers and to urge your support for HB2023.

Ascension Via Christi St. Joseph's Emergency Department currently has 29 beds and sees an average of 110 patients per day, a volume of patients that is far more than its capacity and is consistent with a 49-bed emergency department. Twenty percent of the patients who present to our St. Joseph emergency department have a mental health diagnosis, averaging 650 behavioral health patients every month in this facility alone. In addition to our emergency department experiencing volumes that exceed our capacity, we have been seeing a significantly increased volume of threats and acts of violence toward associates, nurses and physicians over the past three years. Screaming, cursing, spitting, hitting, biting, tackling and even choking are among the many experiences that our staff witness on a daily basis. Reports of verbal and physical violence come in at an average rate of nearly 1.5 per day in our facility.

The St. Joseph campus experienced 378 episodes of violence from January to November of 2022 alone. It is an issue that has simply become far too common in what is intended to be a healing environment and safe workplace. Last year, Courtney, a nurse at the St. Joseph campus, was punched directly in her stomach after being told by a patient that she was going to hurt her and the patient said, "nobody will do anything about it." The patient was familiar with and referencing the lack of legal consequences for her actions. This scenario produces a number of relevant issues and reinforces the importance of this bill. This particular patient was a known violent offender, with knowledge of how current law and enforcement practices result in little or no consequences for violence against healthcare workers. The patient was well aware that the violence committed would result in no more than a misdemeanor offense and that by committing it, the patient would be able to return to the streets or the hospital just a few hours later and would not be held in our facility where we could provide treatment. As a society, we cannot continue to allow this to happen.

Ascension Via Christi hospitals have implemented a series of measures to try and mitigate this violence; however, as you know, all hospitals are experiencing a shortage of healthcare workers and the increased threats and acts of violence only increase our workforce challenges. At the St. Joseph campus, we have security staff onsite and panic buttons for our associates. Even with these interventions, staff continually report being fearful on a daily basis. We screen each individual patient for a history of violence and potential for violent behavior and have established a system wide workplace violence prevention plan.



The individual patient screening can help, but the additional staff time and resources necessary to deal with violent patients requires additional scarce resources, including staff time, which only exacerbates the existing workforce shortage.

Patients who witness these acts of violence are frightened, frustrated and do not want to have their safety or care impacted by the few violent patients. With violence in healthcare settings continuing to rise in Kansas and around the country, it is absolutely necessary that we partner with our legislature to find solutions to curb this senseless violence and ensure the proper deterrence is in place for these actions.

If nothing is done, nurses, physicians and healthcare staff will continue to be in danger; patients and visitors will continue to knowingly abuse the system; and the threats and violence will continue to contribute to the rising healthcare turnover and vacancy rates. Vacancy and turnover rates in 2021 for licensed practical nurses and staff nurses were higher than in all previous years dating back to 2013. This week alone, three nurses gave their notice of resignation at the St. Joseph campus, specifically citing the growing violence against healthcare workers. These are committed, competent nurses, constituents of this community you serve, who will no longer offer their clinical expertise to all the patients who could benefit from their care. Why? Because of the violent few who commit these crimes without meaningful consequences. This trend will only continue if this violence is not stopped.

On behalf of the physicians, nurses and caregivers of Ascension, we urge you to support HB2023 to help us work together to keep us and our patients safe.