




WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Assembly Committee on Aging and Long-Term Care
FROM: Kim Vercauteren, Executive Director 
DATE: January 12, 2022
RE: AB 215, Visitation of a Long-term Care Facility Resident or Hospital Patient

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), the public policy voice of the bishops of Wisconsin, I express our support for Assembly Bill 215. Assembly Bill 215 allows a nursing home or assisted living facility resident or hospital patient to designate an “essential visitor” during compassionate care situations. The bill also requires that assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and hospitals allow at least one member of the clergy to visit with a resident or patient.

Catholics regard caregiving as part of a healing ministry modeled on the work of Christ himself:

Jesus’ healing mission went further than caring only for physical affliction. He touched people at the deepest level of their existence; he sought their physical, mental, and spiritual healing (Jn 6:35, 11:25-27). He “came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn 10:10).¹

The professionals who provide daily assistance and medical care for the elderly, individuals with disabilities, and those seeking treatment for illness or chronic conditions perform demanding work, often with risk to their own health. However, in focusing on basic physical needs and the preservation of physical health, as a society we sometimes overlook the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of our humanity. Instead, we should recognize God’s image in our neighbor and support the whole person - mind, body, and spirit.

Regular, meaningful visitation has been shown to promote improved health in care facilities, resulting in faster recovery from illness or treatment, reduced anxiety and stress, and increased monitoring of an individual’s condition. A loved one’s listening presence can help those dealing with powerlessness, pain, and alienation; provide aid in decision-making; and show patients that they are more than the sum of their physical ailments.

Clergy have an essential role in this care, providing prayer, advice, comfort, and communion. Many faith traditions require that only clergy administer certain rites. Within the Catholic tradition, for example, those facing death will request visitation by a priest for confession, the

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Healthcare Services (Sixth Edition)*, 2018, p. 6, https://www.usccb.org/resources/ethical-religious-directives-catholic-health-service-sixth-edition-2016-06_0.pdf

anointing of the sick, and Holy Communion. By providing long-term care residents and hospital patients with regular access to clergy visitation, AB 215 makes certain that vulnerable individuals continue to receive spiritual care when it is most necessary.

The need for the consolation of loved ones and spiritual preparation often grows, not diminishes, as physical health fails. It is for this reason that we urge an amendment to AB 215 that would allow essential visitors access to assisted living or nursing home residents nearing the end of life, as is provided for hospital patients under the bill.

We also recognize that visitors can bring potential risks, such as the enhanced transmission of disease and further stress on staff. However, under the provisions of AB 215, a facility may refuse to allow access for visitation if a visitor or clergy member refuses to comply with the facility's public health policies. Doing so, ensures that facilities can maintain a safe and controlled environment that does not result in further challenges for residents, patients, and staff.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how essential it is to have the direct support of faith, family, and friends. Efforts to limit the contagion forced individuals to face daily challenges, frightening uncertainty, and even dire health issues in isolation. Assembly Bill 215 ensures that, during challenging times, all those in need of visitation are accommodated. We urge you to support this humane legislation.

Thank you.