

DATE: July 16, 2024

SUBJECT: Oral Remarks

Good afternoon, members of the State Health Coordinating Council. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is LaTanya Johnson. I'm a master's prepared registered nurse for 22 years. I am also a native Charlottean and current Mecklenburg County citizen.

For years, I've had the privilege of serving as Senior Director of Clinical Shared Services at VIA Health Partners. In that time, I've come to know this organization as a mission-driven one, staffed by clinicians, administrative staff, leaders, and volunteers who share a sincere and deep commitment to serving all patients at the end of life regardless of race, ethnicity, background and ability to pay. We were formed as a non-profit by volunteers in a church basement; by people of Mecklenburg County for all of Mecklenburg County.

Today, with the understanding that an agency with no local ties to Mecklenburg County or North Carolina, will be making a special needs petition to this committee, my colleagues and I feel compelled to offer our comments. It is our hope in coming before this committee today to powerfully demonstrate that Mecklenburg County already has a progressive, culturally competent provider in VIA Health Partners. An organization who is already delivering an exceptionally high level of quality and compassion, across all demographics.

I am well acquainted with this exceptional care, not just because I'm now a part of the dedicated team that delivers it, but because prior to ever becoming a part of the team, I was a recipient of the culturally competent care that VIA Health Partners provides. In October 2017, my own grandmother was a patient at the Levine Dickson Hospice House – Huntersville. The care she (and my family) received was exceptional. In her final days, I remember her resting peacefully, showing no signs of pain or distress. Undoubtedly, a testament to the expert pain and symptom management she received. I remember the nurses asking us to bring in her favorite gospel music to play quietly in her room. They knew her faith was unwavering. I remember the staff relaxing the visitation policy so that all of the grandchildren could remain at the bedside, laughing and performing as if we were all in her own living room, just the way she would have wanted. My grandmother's large family was important to her. I remember when she died, the nurse, who was African American, sang a hymn and placed a sprig of rosemary in her hands, the smell of which still elicits memories of grandmother for my teenage girls who were little kids at the time.

What I didn't connect consciously then, but now know, is that the VIA Health Partners nurses and providers and all who interacted with our family, through their discussion, active listening and quiet assessment, were seeking to understand, working to tailor their care to meet my grandmother's physical, emotional, and cultural needs. They showed respect for our values, our beliefs and for our family interactions. As a result, we felt respected and cared for. It felt like home.

My grandmother's care experience was so remarkable that it served as a catalyst for me to find ways to become a part of the great work VIA was doing. Soon afterwards, I joined the VIA Health Partners team. In my current role, I provide leadership and operational oversight to the teams who are directly responsible for care and communication at critical access and delivery points. I manage a diverse staff of intake coordinators, admissions nurses, hospital liaisons and an after-hours team, dedicated to managing critical patient and caregiver needs at night and throughout the weekend.

At VIA Health Partners, we work diligently to remove the barriers to care that so disproportionately affect African Americans and other underserved populations, like insufficient insurance – we provide hospice services regardless of ability to pay. Transportation barriers- we provide comprehensive hospice care wherever patients may live around the clock. Language barriers – VIA Health Partners spent over \$50,000 in translation services in 2023, exclusively on patient interactions. This does not reflect the investment in printing and translation fees for multiple languages of forms, patient handouts, marketing materials and other such collateral.

VIA Health Partners invested in a 6-bed inpatient unit in the heart of the lowest median income segment of Mecklenburg County, with intentionality. Levine & Dickson Hospice House – Aldersgate operates in a convenient location to minority populations, offering them access to a beautiful inpatient hospice setting, close to home, in a familiar neighborhood and with minimal travel for their families. This was done purposefully with access and community mission behind the decision.

These are just some of the ways that VIA Health Partners demonstrates commitment to equitable access and to the delivery of culturally competent care to all of Mecklenburg County. Our efforts are real, tangible, meaningful and have yielded positive, measurable outcomes in this county and state.

With all of this being said, I am acutely aware that African Americans are reluctant still to seek hospice care. This challenge, this cultural barrier, is not a simple one. It is complex and layered and deeply rooted in religious beliefs and unfortunately in a long and painful history of discrimination in the United States. Many from the African American community are reluctant to plan for the end of life. Research suggests that just about 8 percent of African Americans have an advanced directive or living will and black patients are more likely to forgo hospice, opting for aggressive treatment even when there is little chance of survival. When a physician suggests stopping treatment, it's met with skepticism and mistrust, if not by the patient, then by the family support system or church members whom they rely heavily upon to make decisions. We approach our work with this understanding. Every day at VIA Health Partners, as we live our mission, we're out there in the community, building trust, providing education about hospice services, and having meaningful conversations about just how beneficial hospice can be for all, including African Americans. Thank you.

