

May 14, 2020

Dear Representative Plakon,

On Thursday, May 7, my grandfather Roger Swanson, a World War II veteran, passed away at the Colonial Lakes Healthcare nursing home in Winter Garden, Florida. We placed my 94-year old grandfather there in early March, just as the COVID-19 restrictions were going into place. When we did this, we did it with the understanding that nursing homes such as this were going to be safer places for the elderly to be than hospitals or other facilities where he might receive care. We also did it under the agreement that if there was an end-of-life situation, we as his next of kin family members would be given the opportunity to visit him before he passed. We were never given such an opportunity. **A WWII veteran died alone.**

For more than 2 months, my grandfather was not able to have any visitors, living the last two months of his life in isolation. **Nothing about our experience with the Colonial Lakes Healthcare nursing home gives us the impression that nursing staff were in there at all to help him with anything.** In fact, the only way we were able to do video calls with him was via an iPad and a set of noise-canceling headphones. The nurses were not helpful to him when he attempted these calls. We had to enlist the help of a technician to go into his room and help him manage the technology to place the call – including charging the devices when the batteries were low.

One of the worse things about hospitals and nursing homes is that there are often so many patients and a shortage of staff. It is often up to the family members to visit them and also prod the medical staff and caregivers to pay attention to their loved one. Bare-bones training due to a lack of funding presents a need for family oversight. Most people, including my family, cannot afford the top nursing homes or home care that many in more privileged positions are able to afford. **Without the necessary family visits, which provide oversight, the sick and elderly are left to languish in neglect – and now they languish alone.**

Without family visits, patients often don't eat enough food nor consume enough liquid, nor even think about asking for help – sometimes they are too incapacitated to do so. Often it is only a family member who can truly understand their needs. **Death due to neglect from an absence of family oversight may even result more deaths than the coronavirus.** And those deaths will be on the hands of the Governor and our elected officials who proceeded with a policy that is leaving devastating unintended consequences.

It is hard to say whether my grandfather would have lived much longer than May 7, 2020, but what is known is that **he lost over forty pounds from the time we placed him in the facility until the time of his death only two months later** – and this condition certainly contributed to his rapid deterioration. The nursing home staff gave little effort to giving him food or water. And, after one try, gave up. But when we previously visited, he ate abundantly in our presence.

While we will be the first to say that hospitals and nursing homes should be protected from unnecessary visitors who may be bringing in viruses like COVID-19, **we believe that leaving the elderly in complete isolation away from family members for this amount of extended time is also inhumane.** We were not asking to visit him every day, but there should definitely be an amount of time that passes where family members can reasonably expect to visit their loved ones. Maybe that is once a week for a few hours, maybe it is once a month. However, we believe that something in between that timeline should be expected.

To have an elderly person waste away for more than a month on their own, or during a time when they are experiencing end-of-life or crisis conditions, is a tragedy beyond comprehension. **We cannot allow one virus to be the only thing we protect people from. There are other physical and mental health conditions that the sick and elderly also suffer from, especially when they cannot be with their family.** We should do everything we can to help them avoid this.

Under Governor DeSantis' executive order locking down the nursing homes to protect against COVID-19, there is a stipulation that close family can see the loved one in an end-of-life condition. However, the policy also seems to allow that visitation opportunity to be at the discretion of the nursing home. The Colonial Lakes Healthcare nursing home in Winter Garden showed no regard for human life or for the ability for my family members and I to be with our WWII veteran father and grandfather during not only his last hours, but for his last two months of life. **This will remain one of the worst experiences of our life for quite some time and a great tragedy for this state and nation in the way we treat the elderly and those who sacrificed in uniform for this country.**

You and your colleagues in the legislature, as well as the Governor, are in a position to do something about this and I hope you will stand up for what is morally right. While those in privilege can afford higher quality nursing care to their loved, many Floridians like my family are left with very few options, including poorly run and administered nursing home facilities like Colonial Lakes Healthcare in Winter Garden. I hope and pray that other Floridians do not have to experience what we have, but with this policy still in place for at least another 60 days, it is likely so many more will – and that is **a tragedy you and your colleagues can end if you are truly interested in saving lives.**

I can be reached at: theorlandolocalnews@gmail.com or (407) 203-9836. Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your response.

Regards,

Marshall Swanson