

Woman testifies in DC about neglect

Her mother was in nursing home

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Patricia Blank, a Shell Rock resident and Iowa Public Radio host, spoke before the Senate Finance Committee in Washington, D.C. Wednesday morning about her mother's death — and the nursing home neglect that led to it.

"One of the most frustrating parts about how she died was during her 15 years at Timely Mission Nursing Home in Buffalo Center, Iowa, was my family believed she was getting good care," she said.

Her mother, Virginia Olthoff, died after being dehydrated, in severe pain and may not have had any water or food several days before her death in February 2018.

Blank said she was never notified of her mother's problems in the weeks leading up to her death.

In previous years, Blank received regular communication on how her mother was doing every week, whenever the nursing home altered her medication and was asked for permission on everything from giving her mother a haircut to new glasses. "According to multiple staff members, my mother had been eating very

action to fix the issues.

"I'll continue to make it a top priority to ensure our most vulnerable citizens have access to quality long-term care in an environment free from abuse and neglect," Grassley said in his opening statements.

Today's hearing was not just to discuss neglect that had already occurred, but what can be done to prevent these situations in the future. Grassley questioned the "five-star system," a quality ranking system through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, that using health inspections and rates staff.

Experts said the five-star system does not accurately identify nursing home abuse, and Blank seconded that point in a personal anecdote. She said that when the administrator of her nursing home changed — which is when she believed the quality of care degraded — the nursing home did not lose its five-star rating.

In a call with Iowa reporters Thursday, Grassley said the committee hearing may produce legislation, but he did not yet know what it would look like. He said one major takeaway was that CMS needs a more accurate rating system — which could have prevented deaths like Olthoff's.

contacted her about a report on her mother's death. The Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals proposed a \$29,750 fine for the Buffalo Center nursing home due to Olthoff's death.

However, the state has not imposed that fine to allow the CMS to take over the case. To date, no state or federal fine has been imposed.

Blank thanked the people who take care of nursing home residents properly, people who report neglect and Clark Kauffman, the former Des Moines Register reporter who covered her mother's case.

"I do want to thank the (certified nursing assistants), the nurses and others who work in care facilities who do their jobs right," she said. "The facilities are understaffed and these people work for much less money than they should be paid. Please thank these people if you have a loved one in one of these nursing homes."



Olthoff

little and drinking almost nothing for two weeks — where was my phone call then?” Blank asked. “The report also said she had been crying out in pain, often — where was my phone call then?”

Blank was one of four people brought to testify before the Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley’s Senate committee to talk about abuse and neglect in nursing homes.

After Blank spoke, another daughter of a nursing home abuse victim from Florida spoke, as did several experts who discussed what the Senate can do to take on malpractice in nursing homes.

Grassley, the finance committee chair, and Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, are leading possible legislative

“You have Virginia dying as a result of (their care), which obviously proves it shouldn’t have had a five-star rating,” he said.

While most assessments of nursing homes are performed by state investigators, it’s the job of CMS to make sure state workers are holding homes accountable, Grassley said. “They’re supposed to be checking on the checkers.”

The Iowa Republican also said addressing the high turnover rates in nursing home staff and making sure bad actors are reported to law enforcement could also help stop elder abuse in care facilities.

Blank found out about the allegations of abuse and neglect at her mother’s nursing home after a Des Moines Register reporter

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