

City Council Testimony January 2014

The Patient Safety Act sets limits on the number of patients a nurse can be expected to care for safely at any one time. The resolution before you endorses this legislation which is vital to protecting the health and safety of the citizens whom you represent and I serve.

As stated in this resolution a number of studies have shown that safe nurse ~~to patient~~ <sup>staffing</sup> ratios prevent costly errors and unnecessary readmissions for patients. According to the federal government, Massachusetts hospitals have among the highest readmission rates in the nation. This week the state's Health Policy Commission issued a report that found our state wastes more than \$700 million each year due to these readmissions. Last year, our own hospital at the Cambridge Health Alliance <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ among a group of hospitals that received the highest penalties from the Medicare program for excessive readmissions of our patients. Patients are admitted to the hospital because they need professional nursing care: when they do not have that care, patients do not recover as well and they are at increased risk for complications. Our patients at the Cambridge Health Alliance come from populations that are underserved and at even greater risk for these complications. This is a major problem for our community. Having safe, effective and professional nurse staffing is one of the keys to solving it. The Patient Safety Act does this.

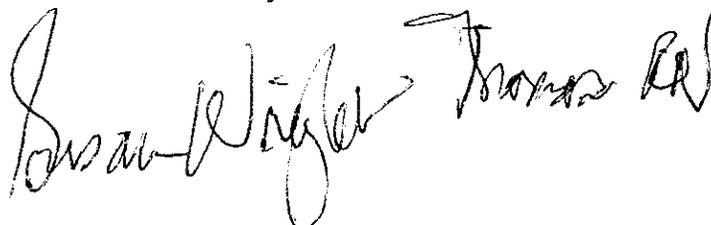
I would speak to you about how nurse staffing affects my patients, probably among the most vulnerable we treat. I am a neonatal nurse. I care for newborns and their mothers. I also take care of babies who are readmitted to the hospital for jaundice. These

readmissions are costly in terms of dollars but they are even more costly because they are accompanied by worry, fear and disruption in families. Many of these babies readmitted for jaundice have lost weight and become sick because they are not effectively breastfeeding.

The benefits of exclusive breastfeeding to babies and their mothers are well documented and this practice is recommended by the World Health Organization, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Cambridge Health Alliance in its decision to become a Baby-Friendly Hospital. It is also well documented that the support of healthcare providers, particularly nurses who provide care in the first few days of life, is essential to the successful initiation and maintenance of breastfeeding. As most breastfeeding mothers can tell you, this natural ~~action that~~ "every mother can do" is <sup>in reality</sup> ~~actually~~ a complex behavior that many mothers and babies need help to learn.

Providing this help is one of the most important things I do in my nursing practice. It is labor intensive work requiring not just specialized knowledge, but focus, attention and presence. I cannot do this effectively if I have too many patients and if a mother senses that I am rushed in any way she is less likely to ask for the help she needs. I find this unacceptable. *and I think you would too.*

On behalf of my colleagues who have advocated for more than twenty years for their patients' rights to safe care, for the patients in our community who placed their trust in us to provide that care, and for my babies and their families, I urge you to pass this resolution in support of the Patient Safety Act.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susan Wiegler Thomas RN". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.