



Testimony Before the Department of Health
Regarding the Repealing of 19-13-D4b

The issue being debated regarding lowering the standards for the quality of hospice care in Connecticut has me saddened and worries me that, as a sign of the times, the care we owe people at perhaps the most sacred, sensitive, potentially beautiful part of their life – their last chapter before passing – will now become part of the cutback surge that we see all around us.

My feisty, high school teacher, mother, Vera B. Yarrow, was the beneficiary of the Connecticut Hospice care during the chapter of her life after she came to terms with her doctor's assessment that there was nothing more he could do for her. Her Leukemia had progressed to an advanced stage, and she was told that she had, perhaps a week left, or a little bit more.

The day after the doctor told her, "I'm afraid the time has come, Vera", I drove my mother up to Hospice in Branford. (I had done a benefit for The Connecticut Hospice and sung for the patients, previously, so I already knew it was a place where the nurses and staff's feet do not touch the ground. They are, I maintain, in a state of spiritual grace.

Though she was fragile and unsteady on her feet, when we arrived, my mother refused my arm. She demanded to "walk in by herself" and she did so as if she were running for office. She

introduced herself to each of the volunteers and staff and noted, "I had planned to do some volunteer work here, myself, but I'm afraid I never got to it. Do you know my son? He's the famous folksinger, Peter Yarrow, of Peter Paul & Mary."

The day after being admitted Vera started to show signs of rapid decline. Her bowel movements were uncontrollable and her sheet and bedclothes needed changing every few hours. We both marveled at the way the nurses helped her through this potentially humiliating discomfort with grace and loving good humor. They truly were angels.

The doctors were always on hand to prescribe the next degree of pain medication, nausea medication, sedation when needed and consequently, my mother, far from being diminished by her circumstance, was truly in her glory.

Each night I'd sing to her and about twenty or thirty other patients and, as our remaining few days passed, I ran through my entire repertoire of songs, starting with the old, traditional, folk songs, then the early Peter Paul & Mary songs, the Dylan, Denver and Lightfoot songs and then all the songs I'd written.

She'd literally conducted the patients to join in the choruses, wearing the Connecticut Hospice cap that suited her so well. She looked absolutely radiant with her hair cut short after, for the majority of her eighty-seven years, it's being long and tied up, as schoolteachers of her generation were wont to do.

Visitors, who came to see her with some degree of trepidation, were amazed. They were afraid to see her for fear that they'd cry or break down or be shocked by her appearance. But when they entered her room, they were showered by her brilliant light, a beautiful, little, spiritual being whose very presence

was a blessing, not just to me and the hospice staff, but to all who were lucky enough to visit her and spend a few minutes basking in her radiance.

You may wonder how this was possible, posit that she was hardly a candidate for Hospice, but you would be wrong. She was only able to live that last chapter of her life with such joy, dignity, absence of fear and spiritual beauty because of the staff, the doctors and the nurses – and the intelligence and loving care with which they treated and cared for her.

Absent that, I'd venture to say her last days would have been fraught with shame at her physical condition. She would have been beset by great pain, but, due to the great skill of those attending her, she remained fully awake during the day, and virtually pain free. As the days we had left became fewer, she would have been greatly confused and frightened by her slowly disintegrating cognitive abilities as the Leukemia finally reached her brain, save for the skill of those at Hospice who gave her a beautiful last week of life, and a bit more. They calmed her, reassured her and fully loved her, and her passing became a triumph of life and beauty.

For myself, I experienced the most intense closeness I have ever shared with anyone as I slept outside her room each night, held her hand and told her how much I would miss her – and she would comfort me, the son I knew she loved as much as anyone could ever love a child.

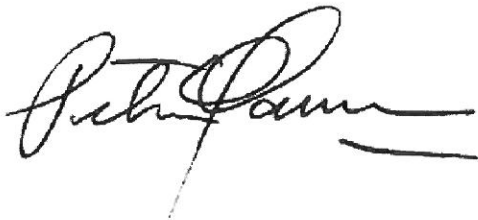
The Connecticut Hospice gave me one of the most precious gifts of my entire life, and it was equally so for my mother. I am, not unexpectedly, deeply saddened that it might be, with the proposed changing of the rules and regulations for hospice

care in Connecticut, if that were to actually happen, that others might never have the chance to receive this gift of gifts.

I worry that our society, already shocked by violence among our children, and wave upon wave of policies that reflect, not the compassion of the members of society for each other, but the bottom line of pragmatics and money, will be depriving itself of one essential dimension of respect for life that could injure us deeply, and bruise our already greatly bruised American heart.

Surely, some things like the dignity and absence of pain that we all deserve at the end of our lives need to be prioritized and preserved in our society. As do our children, their safety and their well being, we must, absolutely must, give the greatest priority to those sacred aspects of our life that ultimately make life meaningful. I pray that the Connecticut Hospice and all that it does for people, has done for me, and can do for others will not only continue to be all that it is in its care for those that will soon pass, but that other hospice care, not only in Connecticut but throughout the country and beyond, will continue to strive to measure up to what they have miraculously done in Branford since hospice care in America first began.

Peter Yarrow, Peter Paul and Mary

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter Paul and Mary". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

(Peter is a member of the Board of the Connecticut Hospice, has made many appearances for the patients, and has been a public advocate for hospice care even before his mother passed her last days there.)