

## Personal Statement

Rev. Walter H. Windley, IV

Good afternoon! Thank you, Council Members, for allowing me the opportunity to share a few personal remarks today. I am speaking in reference to the proposed adjusted need determination for a new hospice home care office in Mecklenburg County. My name is Rev. Walt Windley, and I serve as Sr. Director of Spiritual Care and Grief Services at VIA Health Partners, formerly known as Hospice and Palliative Care Charlotte Region. I am both a son and grandson who has benefited from the holistic care provided by hospice support, an experience that has forever shaped my family's understanding of respect and dignity at end of life. This local North Carolinian did not grow up with hospice aspirations, but sometimes life creates a dissonance through which an unparalleled beauty of surprised joy is allowed to surface. At 16 years old, I was supposed to be celebrating a newly minted driver's license and navigating the birth of teenage freedom; instead, I found myself mourning a father who left this life far too early, loving younger siblings who were as lost as I felt, and trying to figure out what the future had in store for me when none of it made sense. Little did I know that a seed was being planted that has now turned into almost 13 years of hospice specific work in spiritual care and bereavement.

In my current role, I have the privilege of guiding more than 50 chaplains and grief counselors in serving the patients, families, survivors and community members within the VIA service area. My departments are dedicated to the principles of empathy, peace, empowerment, love, inclusivity and connection, recognizing that no two people are exactly alike and that every journey in and through grief, be it anticipatory, preparatory, or realized, must be individualized for context, meaning and ingrained rootedness to what is centrally important or concrete in that person's understanding of both life and death. I am proud to say that VIA has championed that cause since 1978, and we remain dedicated to growth, not just in healthcare delivery, but in embracing the whole self for betterment of worth and personhood. But what does this look like? How do we make that connection between theory and practice in being a culturally competent hospice and palliative care provider? Our clinicians reflect the diversity of the communities in which we serve, including 44% of chaplains in Mecklenburg County representing the black community and historically black denominations including National Baptist Convention USA, AME Zion Church and Progressive National Baptist Convention. Our chaplains also receive monthly education congruent to our changing context. In the past, that has included partnerships with Imam Anis and the local Mosques to facilitate ritual, speedy burial and adherence to purity laws with a rapidly growing black Islamic presence in the metro area. It includes the Rev. Dr. Virgil Lattimore, III, President of Hood Theological Seminary, a historically black Methodist seminary instructing chaplains in the importance of narrative and song as central to black theology. It looks like open fellowship with diverse spiritual entities from Paganism to the Catholic Church, noting the importance of symbiotic relationships where we are both giving and receiving in our education and offering, a hallmark of cultural competency that embraces people of all backgrounds, race and belief.

From a grief perspective, VIA will celebrate 25 years of Chameleon's Journey this fall, an annual overnight grief camp for students ages 7 to 17 who have faced a loss. These campers have gone on to become doctors, nurses, therapists, lawyers, teachers...well-adjusted adults who, much like me, went through a season of loss that felt impassable. Thousands of campers, due to the incredible

generosity and care of VIA, have received this support completely free of charge. Our campers represent the full gamut of socioeconomic diversity as experienced in Charlotte, and our partnerships with title 1 schools within the county for follow-up and grief education/support speaks of our ongoing commitment to underserved people groups. In addition, we strive to teach responsibility in the midst of grief, addressing social justice issues like food inequity by packing over 10,000 meals that are distributed in local neighborhoods by second harvest food bank. Our volunteers are as inclusive as our campers, reflecting a shared experience and mirrored hope. Last year, my grief counselors completed more than 15,000 individual contacts, noting that some 23% were community referrals due to loss from overdose, motor vehicle accident, hospitalization, murder or similar traumatic event. Throughout our history, we have never billed a single dollar for that grief support, eliminating common barriers for mental health care. We are leading in the formation of a grief consortium in Mecklenburg County with input from community leaders at Atrium and KinderMourn and continue to partner with groups like Unity Church International, Solace Grief and the local Stephen's Minister Associations to educate and equip those who are in the caring field. You see, at VIA, we are not just treating all patients like family, but we go even a step further, walking with one another to reestablish community in those places where connection has been lost. And this is who we have always been. VIA...to journey with...is so much more than just a name. It is the very heartbeat and fabric of who we are and continue to be – a culturally competent, fully empathetic, holistic provider of hospice care.