

Massachusetts veterans hospital investigated for COVID-19 catastrophe

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Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker announced an investigation Wednesday into a spate of deaths at the 247-bed Soldiers' Home run by the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in the small city of Holyoke in the western part of the state.

As of Friday afternoon, there were 21 residents confirmed to have died at the Soldiers' Home in a span of only 10 days. Of those who died, 15 tested positive for COVID-19. Tests were negative for two other deceased patients and results are pending for one more. A total of 59 current residents of the Soldiers' Home have tested positive for COVID-19. An official with Massachusetts Health and Human Services (HHS) released a statement saying that "the numbers of infected residents and deaths will continue to increase over the coming days.

The deaths at the Soldiers' Home were initially hidden from both the mayor of Holyoke, Alex Morse, and local health officials, who only became aware of a developing situation when employees at the facility reached out to them on Friday, March 12, with information that there was "a case that turned into several cases."

Health officials attempted to contact the facility the next day, but received no response. Morse continued to receive information about the scope of the virus' spread over the weekend, including an unsigned letter asking whether he was "aware of the horrific circumstances at the Soldiers' Home." The letter mentioned one case of a resident suspected of infection with COVID-19 being sent back to the dementia ward with other patients.

Morse was able to speak with Bennett Walsh, the superintendent of the Soldiers' Home, on Sunday, March 14. Walsh told Morse that eight veterans had died in a span of five days, but appeared to downplay

the deaths by repeatedly mentioning that in all cases there were underlying health conditions.

Morse was shocked at Walsh's attempt to play down the issue and described him as having a "clear lack of urgency." Morse then proceeded to contact Francisco Ureña, the state secretary of Veterans Affairs. Morse likewise perceived Ureña's response as showing a "lack of urgency or action" and pursued the matter with Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito. Morse was able to get in touch with the lieutenant governor "within minutes" and she put him in contact with state HHS Secretary Marylou Sudders, who promised to send a response team to the Holyoke facility the next day.

The task force arrived on Monday, March 31, by which time eleven deaths had already been reported. Accompanying the "clinical command group" sent by Sudders were members of the National Guard, tasked with testing all people at the facility and performing basic functions in the absence of the many sick staff members awaiting their test results.

As the story has unfolded in the media, staff members have come forward and spoken to local news outlets. The picture that emerges from their accounts is of a facility in chaos, with administrators ignoring basic safety protocols amidst a surge of infections and deaths. One certified nursing assistant claims that after many employees fell ill, patients from two medical units were crowded into one unit because of staffing shortages, and that staff treating contagious patients were denied basic protective equipment. Employees also allege they were intimidated for voicing their concerns at the hazardous conditions.

On the same day the state task force arrived, Massachusetts HHS Deputy Secretary Dan Tasi announced that Soldiers' Home Superintendent Walsh

would be placed on leave. On Wednesday, Walsh released a pro forma statement expressing his “grief and sorrow” for what had taken place at the facility, although he defended his handling of the situation, claiming, “At no time did I, or anyone on my staff, hide, conceal or mislead anyone regarding the tragic impact of the virus and it would be outrageous for anyone to even think of doing such a thing. .. all our decisions were informed by the available CDC [Centers for Disease Control] and DPH [Department of Public Health] guidelines on COVID-19.”

The fact that neither Holyoke’s mayor nor any members of its Board of Health were informed of the deaths as they were piling up belies this assertion. Furthermore, Walsh’s claim to have followed CDC and DPH recommendations is contradicted by the accounts of staff members and the speed and lethality of the outbreak itself.

While the full results of the state investigation are pending, the facts that have emerged show a shocking lack of preparedness on the part of US Department of Veterans’ Affairs in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The agency, which operates under the executive branch, employs around 380,000 people and serves over 9 million veterans at hundreds of medical facilities and clinics across the country. Both Democratic and Republican politicians, despite their solemn professions of devotion to those fighting in their neverending wars of aggression, have for decades failed to fund the VA and its health infrastructure according its real needs. As a result, the agency has long been incapable of providing adequate health care to the nation’s veterans.

This fact was laid bare in 2014 during an investigation by CNN into numerous deaths caused by delays in diagnosing and treating veterans at VA hospitals nationwide. In one case, VA administrators responsible for hospitals in Phoenix were found to have been systematically falsifying records in order to hide the months-long wait time that veterans faced when seeking an appointment with a doctor. In some cases, patients waited over a year to see a doctor while others were unable to schedule appointments altogether. Dr. Sam Foote, the doctor who had recently retired from working in the Phoenix VA system and broke the story to CNN, claimed he knew of a staggering 40 deaths that resulted directly from the nightmarish wait times

patients had to endure to see doctors.

Though the 2014 scandal highlighted negligence and corruption on the part of VA administrators, ultimate responsibility for those deaths, like those piling up at the Holyoke Soldiers home, rests with the political gangsters in government who refuse to adequately fund the VA, along with the rest of the nation’s health infrastructure.

In 2016, only two years after the scandal about wait times made headlines, the official blog of the VA noted that “the House Appropriations Subcommittee marked up the 2016 Veterans Affairs funding bill, and slashed more than \$1.4 billion from the president’s requested budget for America’s Veterans ... [the House proposal] reduces VA medical care by \$690 million. ... As a result of the overall cut to medical services, an estimated 70,000 fewer Veterans will receive the VA care they need.”

Four years later, amidst a global pandemic, the decades-long neglect of the VA health system is again exacting its toll, further proof that the ruling class of the richest nation on earth is incapable of providing basic services to its population or protecting it from future disasters. As of April 3, the VA is following 2,184 veterans testing positive for COVID-19 at its facilities and has reported 78 deaths. The impact on all veterans is likely much higher.



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