

Pennsylvania nursing home says all 800 patients and staff have COVID-19

Nurse: “Not providing staff with masks and other personal protective gear is criminal”

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After being unable to do the required testing, one of the largest nursing homes in western Pennsylvania is operating under the assumption that all of the facility’s nearly 800 patients and staff have been infected with COVID-19.

As of Tuesday, three patients had died and at least 42 patients and 10 staff members at the Brighton Rehabilitation and Wellness Center have tested positive for COVID-19. The center has also stopped listing the number of patients and staff infected along with the number of deaths on their daily posting.

Family and friends of those in the nursing home are distraught as they are unable to see their loved ones and are now unable to find out whether they are infected or not.

Keri Boyer, the daughter of 73-year-old Earl Denbow, who died Monday from COVID-19, told Channel 11 news how fast her father died. “They called me last Monday to say that he wasn’t feeling well, and they started him on an IV and he had a slight fever. They tested him Thursday. They got the (positive) results on Friday. They called hospice in on Sunday, and he was gone yesterday ... that quick.”

Nurses and other staff at the facility were outraged at the speed the infection was growing inside the home and the lack of action by management to stop the spread and provide staff protective gear. Nurses report that they have been sent to work with patients with COVID-19 and were denied N95 masks.

On Thursday, nurses and other health care workers at the facility walked off the job demanding management provide them with protective equipment as the

coronavirus spread through the 589-bed facility.

Tamera Witherspoon, a nurse, told WTAE-TV that she was sent to work with COVID-19 patients, but was denied access to even a face mask. “I can’t believe I was denied as a health care worker, from another health care worker, to work in unsafe conditions,” Witherspoon told the Pittsburgh TV station.

“I was livid, but I was also on duty,” she said. “There are patients that need to be cared for so I’m in a predicament.” Witherspoon told the station that she was angry but continued to care for her patients, but was outraged when she saw administrators wearing the protective gear.

“You’re not doing patient care and I’m at the bedside doing patient care, and I have three kids at home and I ask you and you’re denying me to have an N95? I just think that’s deplorable,” she said.

Union officials worked quickly to end the walkout and get staff to return to work, promising workers would receive N95 masks and “frontline” workers’ hazard pay.

In a contemptuous press release, SEIU Healthcare Pennsylvania President Matthew Yarnell said, “This crisis has highlighted how vulnerable our health care system is and that caregivers’ input and voice is absolutely essential if we want to provide high-quality care in this country.”

Rather than fighting for full protective gear, universal testing and emergency action to stop the spread and protect the patients and workers, the union works as a second level of management to ensure the nursing home remains running with enough staff.

On Monday, unable to test all the patients and staff that showed symptoms, management at the nursing home, along with local health officials, decided to designate anyone with symptoms COVID-19 positive and assume that all 450 patients and 300 staff members are also infected.

While local news is treating this as management finally recognizing the severity of the crisis, in reality they are accepting the possibility that scores of patients and staff will die while taking no action to further stop the spread of the virus.

No attempt is being made to isolate and remove those who are not yet infected. No additional equipment is being brought into the home to treat the sick, no facilities are in place to house the staff and protect their families and the community from its spread.

The virus continues to spread through Pennsylvania. State health officials reported that there was a surge in deaths, climbing 48 percent on Tuesday, with 78 new deaths bringing the total to 240. The total number of cases has climbed to 14,669.

“We assume that the true rate of [COVID-19] is much higher than the one we’re reporting,” State Secretary of Health Dr. Rachel Levine, said.

Throughout Pennsylvania, 664 health care workers have been infected; 674 people living in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities outside the Beaver nursing home have also been infected.

A nurse who works at a long-term care home near Pittsburgh, a sister facility of the Brighton Rehabilitation and Wellness Center, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the company only cares about profits and not the patients or the staff.

“To think that they are not providing staff with masks and other personal protective gear is criminal,” said the nurse, who asked not to be identified for fear of losing her job. “They say they don’t want to scar the patients, but without protection you are spreading the virus.”

She explained that about a month ago, they had to move one of their patients to the Brighton facility to get her away from another patient who was bullying her. “We were all sickened when we learned that she was one of the ones who died,” she said.

“This is a long-term facility. You get to know all the patients here and they become like family. It is very hard when something like this happens that didn’t have to.”

“This wouldn’t have happened if we had universal health care,” the nurse said. “We could send a patient to a facility that best suited them. But because this company only wants to make money, she was sent to one of their facilities.”

The nurse also explained that the lack of support for staff helps to explain the rapid spread of COVID-19 inside the nursing home. “Nurses don’t get any sick days until they’ve worked a year.”

Aides and other staff in nursing homes are some of the lowest paid and overworked workers in the country. In many facilities, aides don’t even make \$15 an hour, with some paid as low as \$10, \$11 and \$12 with little or no benefits.

“Being an aide was the hardest job I ever had,” the nurse said. “You are constantly working and in direct contact with patients, feeding them, taking them to the bathroom, cleaning them, bathing them, getting them dressed.”

Without proper protection and training, workers can unwillingly transfer COVID-19 from one patient to another. The center says that they have only 600 masks and 2,500 surgical gowns on hand, meaning staff will be forced to reuse masks. The cloth-type surgical gowns will not protect an employee from COVID-19 and can even transfer the virus from one person to another.

Following the line of the Trump administration to downplay the danger, as the pandemic spread throughout Pennsylvania and the US, neither the local nor state Departments of Health laid down guidelines to protect nursing home patients and health care workers from COVID-19.



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