

Seventeen bodies found piled in a New Jersey nursing home

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Police discovered 17 corpses piled up in a New Jersey nursing home last Monday. The bodies had been stacked in a small morgue designed to hold a maximum of four bodies.

This ghastly discovery is symptomatic of the disaster unfolding at nursing homes in New Jersey, across the US and internationally. It is yet another stark indication of the reality of mass death from COVID-19 that dominates the lives of millions of workers, even as the Trump administration and capitalist governments in Europe beat the drums for a “return to work” and the “reopening of the economy.”

Last Saturday, an administrator of the Andover Subacute and Rehabilitation Center I and II in Andover, New Jersey, called US Representative Josh Gottheimer to request 25 body bags. The administrator him- or herself was infected with COVID-19. Police came to the facility unannounced at 2 a.m. on Easter Sunday to deliver the body bags and inspect the site. They saw five bodies crowded into the morgue.

On the following day, Andover police received an anonymous tip that a body was being stored in a shed outside of the nursing home. By the time the police arrived to investigate, the body had been moved, but the officers found 17 bodies in the morgue. First-aid squads moved 13 of the bodies to a refrigerated truck parked in front of a hospital in the nearby town of Newton, and a funeral home picked up the others.

Since March 30, 35 people have died at the nursing home, 19 from COVID-19, according to the State Department of Health. In addition, 103 patients and four employees have tested positive for coronavirus, and 133 residents and 48 staff members have flulike or respiratory symptoms.

At least 1,530 deaths in New Jersey have occurred in long-term care facilities like nursing homes. They thus

account for well over one-third of the state’s total deaths of 3,840. Almost every single long-term care facility in the state has had at least one case, suggesting that it has spread extremely widely outside of these facilities. The total number of COVID-19 cases in New Jersey now stands at 78,467, the second highest number of any state in the US. In New York, the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, more than 2,400 patients in nursing homes and assisted living facilities have died from the coronavirus.

These numbers are likely but a pale reflection of the grim reality. New Jersey only announced that it would begin tracking deaths in nursing homes on Friday in the wake of the discovery at Andover. Thousands more deaths do not factor into the official death toll, as many die at home or are not brought to hospitals and are never tested for COVID-19. In recent days, New York City corrected its total death toll upward by 3,700 to well over 10,000, and the city now has a much higher per-capita death rate than Italy, the hardest hit country in Europe. Many nursing facilities still barely test either their patients or staff, and refuse to report even confirmed cases and deaths from COVID-19.

The horrifying spread of the virus in nursing homes has been facilitated by the very poor conditions that prevailed at these facilities well before the outbreak. Andover Subacute and Rehabilitation Center I and II has 700 beds and is the largest licensed facility in New Jersey. Last year, Medicare gave Andover Subacute and Rehabilitation II a one-star rating, which designated the facility as “much below average.” The agency cited inadequate staffing, unsatisfactory inspections, inadequate hygiene, and poor patient care.

Staff have warned about lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and infection control amid the pandemic. On Monday, a desperate employee at the

facility posted the following message on Facebook: “To all the people calling into the governor’s office, the congressman’s office to help us tell them WE NEED HELP.” The post was deleted on Wednesday. Across the United States, health care workers have been threatened with being fired for speaking out about the conditions they face at their job.

Several weeks ago, Lily Repasch, an 84-year-old woman with dementia, died at Andover Subacute and Rehabilitation Center I. Repasch’s daughters said that after the facility stopped allowing visitors, administrators did not provide a way for them to talk to their mother. They also provided no information at all to Repasch’s family. She was never tested for the novel coronavirus.

At a daily news briefing, Democratic Governor Phil Murphy declared himself “outraged” by the discovery of the pile of bodies. “New Jerseyans living in our long-term care facilities deserve to be cared for with respect, compassion, and dignity. We can and must do better.” He directed state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal to investigate all long-term care facilities in New Jersey “that have experienced a disproportionate number of deaths” during the pandemic.

Murphy also announced that the state’s Department of Health had sent representatives to the Andover facility to help workers and patients and ensure that “critical safety measures and protocols” are being followed. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid has sent “surveyors” to inspect the facility, said Health Commissioner Judy Persichilli. This response is too little too late, and many health care workers and family members of patients legitimately ask why much more was not done much earlier, before so many lives were lost.

Murphy is a multimillionaire and former executive at investment bank Goldman Sachs. He and the state legislature have governed New Jersey in the interests of its corporate and financial aristocracy, overseeing cuts in health care and other social spending. The current state budget cuts \$48.5 million in education and hospital spending.

The staggering toll of deaths related to suspected or confirmed coronavirus infection among patients in nursing homes is not limited to the United States. At least 6,773 patients at nursing homes have died in Italy, the European epicenter of the outbreak, since February

1, according to a conservative estimate. This estimate likely understates the true toll, since it is based on a survey of only a fraction of Italy’s nursing homes, and few residents are tested for the virus. In France, deaths at nursing homes account for more than 30 percent of total coronavirus fatalities, a fact the French government only acknowledged after weeks of covering up the real death toll from COVID-19 at these facilities.



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