

Detroit nursing home residents and care workers infected and dying from COVID-19

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28 April 2020

At a news conference Monday afternoon Chief Health Officer of the Detroit Health Department Denise Fair reported that 947 residents of the city have died so far in the COVID-19 pandemic. She also reported that 200 residents along with three nursing home workers had died in the city's 26 nursing homes.

While all residents in Detroit's 26 nursing homes were tested by city EMS workers over the past ten days, only 100 staff have been tested. Fair estimated that there are between 100 and 200 staff employed at each nursing home, meaning thousands of staff remain untested.

Newly released data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) shows a total of 2,637 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among nursing home residents throughout the state. Although the data does not include the number who have died in these facilities, there are 488 Michigan nursing homes with 425 of them reporting cases so far or 87 percent of the total.

The data includes a breakdown of the number of facilities in each county along with a separate list of the names of each nursing home. There are 85 nursing homes in Wayne County, where Detroit is located, the largest number of facilities in any county. The total number of confirmed cases in Wayne County is 864 and, with 57 of the nursing homes reporting infections, the rate of infection is among the greatest in the state at 15 on average per location.

The three counties in the Detroit metropolitan area, Oakland, Macomb and Wayne, combined have 70 percent of the total confirmed coronavirus cases at long-term care facilities in the state.

Four of the homes among the list of highest rates of infection in Michigan are run by Villa Healthcare, a Skokie, Illinois-based for-profit nursing home chain

with a total of 16 facilities in Michigan. There are 200 cases of coronavirus across twelve of the Villa nursing homes in lower Michigan.

According to a report from Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan all 26 nursing homes have cases of COVID-19. In one location, Duggan reported that half of the residents had tested positive. Meanwhile, of all the health care workers and residents who initially tested positive for COVID-19, half of them showed no symptoms of the disease.

Duggan said the city would be testing all nursing home staff as a part of a plan to "partner" with employers at grocery stores and other Detroit businesses to sign on to his six-point plan to get all city workers back on the job as part of the effort to reopen the economy while the pandemic continues to rage.

The Duggan plan is wholly inadequate for guaranteeing workers will be safe. It consists of initial testing that will only clear people to go back to work while relying on masks, daily temperature checks, extra cleaning, self-reporting of exposure by employees themselves, extra stockpiles of protective equipment and social distancing in the work place.

Duggan also offered his services "to automakers and the UAW" to help their negotiations to get the plants back open. He again said his program should be an example to get the whole country back to work.

Duggan's six-point plan is especially useless for nursing home workers who must interact one-on-one with sick and elderly patients. As one care worker explained to the *World Socialist Web Site*, she usually spends, "12 hours on her workdays in enclosed rooms" with her patients in elderly congregate residences.

She has called off work sick, frightened now that her "cold is not just a cold," after learning that one of her co-workers who interacts with the same patient has

tested positive for COVID-19. She said, “There is no way to social distance.” Her biggest fear is that “You can have the virus and pass it on even without symptoms.”

Duggan says that besides the 2000 residents in nursing homes, the city has 100 congregate facilities that house people over 55, or clients of adult foster care homes, and similar buildings. The residents of these buildings are only now being tested while certified nurse assistants (CNA) and other caregivers working in these facilities must travel from place to place to care for elderly there and at single-family residences.

Earlier this month, James House, a 40-year-old Michigan nurse working at the Omni Continuing Care nursing home on Conner Avenue in Detroit died from an illness without being tested for the coronavirus. His sister Catrisha House-Phelps told the *Detroit Free Press* that he died from symptoms consistent with COVID-19.

House-Phelps told reporters her brother had been turned away from a COVID-19 drive-up testing site in March. He was told to go home and wait it out for seven days. On April 7, the father of five left his Warren home just north of Detroit and returned to work at Omni. After collapsing at work, James was rushed to the hospital and within hours had passed away.

MDHSS reports that there are confirmed cases of COVID-19 among the residents at the care facility where James House worked.

Like many other states, news reports indicate that COVID-19 has been raging through nursing homes in Michigan for some time. In early April, the state began investigating a suburban Riverview, Michigan nursing home where seven residents died. They found that 21 residents tested positive, along with 15 of the workers at the Rivergate Terrace Nursing Home. Rivergate is owned by the same company, Life Care Centers of America, that operates the Life Care Center of Kirkland, in Washington state where the first cluster of COVID-19 deaths were found.

When Mayor Duggan launched the nursing home testing program last week, he said testing would be used to identify infected workers and to indicate which patients needed to be isolated from the rest of the population in the homes. However, his fellow Democrat, Governor Gretchen Whitmer, then issued an executive order that left patients with COVID-19

mostly in the same facilities, simply requiring some sort of isolation from healthy patients or transfer to a few regional hubs designated for COVID-19.

Nurses, CNAs and aides working in these homes every day selflessly caring for some of the most vulnerable in society are suffering from these government half-measures which are designed to protect the profits of nursing home management and ownership. Nursing home workers have been working unsustainably long hours due to understaffing at their worksites even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Now with the pandemic hitting virtually every facility, the lives of the workers are being treated as expendable.

Cost cutting and acute exploitation of the workforce is endemic to nursing homes. This extends to the churning that takes place between hospitals and long-term care facilities in recent years as hospitals have looked everywhere to maximize profits and cut costs and maximize high-value patients.

These conditions have developed with the assistance of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The response of the SEIU to the coronavirus crisis has been focused on pressuring Governor Whitmer to provide more personal protective equipment. At the same, the SEIU has praised the governor’s plan to convene a committee to investigate the disproportionate number of deaths and disease among African American residents in Michigan.

The unions representing nursing home workers are working with the Democrats and using identity politics to cover up their joint responsibility for four decades of inequality, poverty and cuts in health care in the city of Detroit.



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