

New Jersey governor seeks private vendor to run state's veterans homes

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New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy has tasked the state's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) to find a private vendor to take over the management of the state's three veterans homes in Vineland, Paramus and Menlo Park.

Murphy's decision came after the announcement that Medicare and Medicaid payments for new admissions were to be halted at the Menlo Park facility on November 22. The decision, based on a New Jersey Health Department inspection, held from August 16 through September 8, found 22 of the home's 201 residents were infected with COVID-19 in a nearly yearlong and ongoing outbreak that has resulted in 17 resident deaths, with at least 76 residents and 225 staff being infected in total. The report stated that administrators failed to implement infection control practices—including testing, contact tracing and staff training.

The report also stated, "The facility's system-wide failure to immediately conduct COVID-19 testing upon the identification of a single new case of COVID-19 posed a serious and immediate risk to the health and well-being of all staff and residents who resided at the facility and who were placed at risk for contracting a contagious and potentially deadly virus."

When an inspector asked for contact tracing on seven residents and four staffers, there was little information on who the infected people were in close proximity to at the homes or whether anyone who was in close contact had been tested.

Across the US, over 212 nursing home workers have died from COVID-19 infections since August, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), likely an undercount.

Murphy dispatched a "mission critical" team to the Menlo Park facility just prior to the federal cutoffs most

likely to ward off the inevitable criticism his administration would face, having done little or nothing to improve the conditions at the facility since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020. The group, which works within the state Department of Health's Office of Long-Term Care Resiliency, is comprised of an experienced administrator, a nurse consultant and an infection preventionist.

"It wasn't until the federal government cut off payments for new admissions for Murphy to be motivated enough to dispatch a 'mission critical team' to the Menlo Park Memorial Home," Jay Boxwell, state commander of the New Jersey chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, said in a statement. "Too little, too late."

He also commented that the Murphy administration "still treats our veterans under their care as second-class citizens."

In September of 2021 Murphy signed a package of toothless bills, including one that requires the DMVA veterans homes to hold quarterly town hall meetings with family members, or other resident guardians; and another that requires the administrator and assistant administrator at each veterans home to have prior work experience in a clinical setting. The state Health Department inspection of the Menlo Park Facility proved the worthlessness of the so-called reforms.

Murphy is also launching an outside review of the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic by a pair of outside law firms that is slated to begin immediately, although a report won't be issued until late 2023.

"This is not just a look back on what we did right, wrong or otherwise, but we want to develop a playbook for the next governors down the road, the next administration who may have to do something—please God they won't—but if they have to, that this is going to

be a relevant document for the future, not just the past,” Murphy told reporters.

This comment is telling in that Medicare and Medicaid have just been cut off to the Menlo Park veterans home because basic protocols like proper mask wearing at the facility are not being followed, which has led to the COVID-19 deaths of 17 of its residents in an ongoing pandemic, while Murphy speaks of concern for a future governor as if the ongoing pandemic has ended.

The other two New Jersey veterans homes fared better in comparison to Menlo Park but have not come through the year unscathed. At the Vineland Veterans Memorial Home an outbreak began on April 27 and has surged in recent weeks. So far there have been 71 Vineland residents—about 30 percent of the population—and 91 employees infected, and one death of a resident, according to the state Department of Health’s website.

The third veterans home, in Paramus, has been the least affected by an outbreak that began there on April 11. Seven residents and 71 employees have contracted COVID-19 in the latest wave, according to state data. Vineland had the highest death tolls at the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, with 86 confirmed and eight probable deaths.

New Jersey has so far agreed to pay a total \$69 million to 190 claimants who lost family members in the state-run veterans homes in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic. The out-of-court settlements allow the state to claim no wrongdoing.

But the state’s response to the pandemic while under Murphy’s governorship, particularly in nursing homes, was one of criminal indifference. By May 4, 2020, more than half of coronavirus-related deaths in New Jersey had occurred at long-term care facilities. In June 2020, anonymous whistleblowers from the state’s department of health called the state’s response to the pandemic “an unmitigated failure” that had resulted in “preventable deaths.”

Although Murphy, a multi-millionaire former Goldman Sachs executive, is striving to give the impression that he will improve conditions at the state’s veterans homes, his administration has abandoned nearly all public health measures it had put in place to control the pandemic. Face masks are no longer required in most outdoor and indoor settings in

New Jersey. Patients testing positive for COVID-19 are requested, but no longer required, to isolate themselves for five days (an amount of time that data have demonstrated is insufficient to prevent viral transmission).

New Jersey’s approach follows that of the US government. The new guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) slash the number of days a worker with COVID-19 must isolate from 10 to five days and do not require a negative test to return to work.

Given these conditions—and the deepening world health crisis where the new, highly immune evasive BQ.1.1 and XBB variants are likely to become dominant this winter—privatizing the management of the three New Jersey veterans homes will do nothing to lessen the health risks of their vulnerable residents. Under the capitalist system, where the financial health of a handful of elites takes precedence over the public health of the many, replacing one set of management hirelings with another makes no positive difference, only giving the appearance of doing so. As much can be said for the three ongoing state and federal investigations of the homes, the results of which will be announced with great fanfare. The importance of the health of the country’s aged veteran “heroes” will be proclaimed yet again, even as they wither and die from preventable diseases.



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