

How COVID killed thousands in Michigan nursing homes, as Whitmer administration stood by

Michael Anders
14 August 2023

A recent investigative report by the *Detroit News* has exposed the conditions which existed in Michigan nursing homes in April and May of 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The investigation made use of 1,200 pages of reports detailing 167 complaints related to staffing and COVID-19 from 67 nursing homes.

The complaints, which are not public records, were filed with Michigan's Bureau of Community and Health Systems (BCHS), which is part of the state's Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA). While the *Detroit News* requested these records in 2020, the state only released them this year, two years and eight months later.

The records expose what healthcare workers, as well as patients and their family members, experienced in nursing homes at the hands of the capitalist profit system.

The elderly residents and patients at these facilities represent one of the most vulnerable sections of society. The state sees them not as people, but as a financial burden which it would be best to reduce. It is vital to keep this fact in sight when contemplating the snapshot of the horrifying and callous conditions revealed in these complaints.

Among the facilities which received the highest number of complaints were the Rivergate complex in Riverview, consisting of Rivergate Terrace and Rivergate Health Care Center, and Villa at Parkridge in Ypsilanti. The two facilities making up the Rivergate complex received 15 complaints, of which state investigators substantiated eight. Villa at Parkridge received the same number of complaints, of which ten were substantiated.

The complaints against Villa at Parkridge show the experiences of patients and their family members. On April 18, 2020, a woman whose mother had been quarantined with a fever in March filed a complaint. The family had heard nothing from March 30 to April 8, when

a nurse called to say that her mother had been transferred to a hospital for trouble breathing. At the hospital, she tested positive for COVID-19, and doctors discovered an infected bed sore that had exposed bone.

Two separate complaints from April 24 show that this case of neglect was not an isolated incident. One patient reported that she was not being regularly cleaned, while the wife of another said that her spouse had to wait for more than an hour after requesting help.

State investigators were able to substantiate all these complaints. In May 2020, investigators revealed that Villa at Parkridge had "failed to properly clean and disinfect resident rooms, placing all 108 residents and staff at risk for contracting COVID-19."

The complaints also show that the neglect of patients was not caused by the workers at these facilities. Rather, they show the desperate circumstances in which the staff found themselves during the pandemic.

At the Rivergate complex, a March 20, 2020 complaint reported that workers did not have personal protective equipment (PPE), had no designated area to isolate infected patients, and the facility was pressuring workers to sign documents promising not to disclose what was happening. Another complaint from April 9 by a registered nurse alleged that 100 out of 168 patients at Rivergate Terrace had the coronavirus. Seven workers, the nurse continued, had been infected and hospitalized.

"I am reporting it because it is shameful and wrong to... watch people die because of lack of supplies or proper PPE or greed or proper clean technique [*sic*] or whatever the hell went wrong and continues to go wrong there, but it needs to end. People are literally dying there every shift."

A separate April 9, 2020 complaint by an employee the Rivergate Health Center reported that seven or eight

residents had died from COVID-19 over a four-day period, and that 11 employees had tested positive. The employee stated, “The management keeps claiming that we don’t have positive cases, but they also haven’t tested them either.”

At a nursing home in Orion Township, Michigan, called Villa at Silverbell Estates, an unidentified employee described the conditions which prevailed there in a complaint filed April 23, 2020. “[I]t is a disaster here. Management is not involved and seem clueless as to what they are doing here to prevent the spread of covid-19. We have had many deaths here in a short time.”

The employee went on to say that the facility was not properly quarantining patients who had tested positive for COVID-19. “We have not been trained on this virus or given any updates. This building is placing our residents and staff at risk. Staff is being placed on all the units and management is attempting to keep the same staff where they have been working.”

The complainant concludes by begging the BCHS to intervene. “Please can you help. I am so afraid of the risks I take every day I come to work. I thought our facility is to protect us and our residents but they are not.”

This cry for help directed at state authorities fell on deaf ears. Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer and her administration left the residents and workers at the mercy of the nursing homes. Her April 15, 2020 executive order left it up to the owners or managers of the facilities to create isolation units and forced them to accept COVID-19 patients released from hospitals.

Later, in May, Whitmer issued another executive order that mandated nursing homes make a “reasonable effort” to create units to isolate patients with COVID-19. However, the evidence from these complaints makes clear that the Whitmer administration knew by then that placing the onus on nursing homes would be a deadly failure.

The full extent of the damage done by the administration’s policy may never be known. However, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services estimates that 5,500 nursing home residents died from the beginning of the pandemic to now.

The nursing homes themselves must not escape blame for their role in these deplorable conditions and deaths. All the nursing homes mentioned are privately owned, for-profit facilities. The two facilities in the Rivergate complex are owned by Life Care Centers of America, a Tennessee-based company with 200 nursing homes in 27 states. According to *Forbes*, the company had \$3 billion in income in 2020, while leaving staff and patients on

their own to fight against COVID-19.

Villa at Parkridge, whose financial information is not available, has a reputation for major violations of state regulations. According to inspection reports on *Pro Publica*, the facility received over \$348,000 in fines from July 21, 2020, to February 1, 2022. Medicare.gov does not currently have a rating for the facility “due to a history of serious quality issues.” Having received 87 complaints resulting in a citation in the last three years, the facility is being inspected more often and may be terminated from Medicare and Medicaid.

As for Villa at Silverbell Estates, its reputation is not much better. Inspection reports from *Pro Publica* show that inspectors have logged 58 deficiencies at the facility between February 5, 2019, and March 30, 2022. Over the period from August 17, 2020, to March 30, 2022, the facility was fined over \$65,000 for violations. Medicare.gov shows a health inspection rating of 2 stars out of 5, with 51 complaints over the last three years resulting in a citation.

The facts show that the Whitmer administration presided over a policy it knew would lead to mass deaths amongst nursing home residents. In comments to the *Detroit News* after its investigation was published, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel described what happened as “tragic” and “unfortunate.” It was in fact an example of the ruling class policy of malign neglect, deliberately leaving nursing home residents and workers to the mercy of the owners in order to protect corporate profit.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact