

The Cost of Inaction: *19 Deaths an Hour and Rising*



U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY (D-PA)

 **RANKING MEMBER** *Special Committee on Aging*

U.S. SENATOR RON WYDEN (D-OR)

 **RANKING MEMBER** *Committee on Finance*

December 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The United States recently surpassed a grim milestone in the COVID-19 pandemic: more than 100,000 residents and workers in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities have died from COVID-19, and the toll continues to mount. The following brief updates previous reports issued by Senate Democrats, providing a snapshot of the worsening crisis in nursing homes across the United States:

- **In November, more than 15 nursing home residents died from COVID-19 per hour, with 19 residents dying each hour during the week of November 22, 2020.**
- **The number of weekly COVID-19 deaths among nursing home residents has increased 133 percent since Labor Day, and 96 percent among nursing home workers during the same period.**
- **Rising COVID-19 infection rates suggest that death rates will continue increasing in nursing homes.**
- **Workforce shortages have increased since Labor Day: In November, one in six nursing homes nationwide reported that they do not have a sufficient workforce.**

As the Nation enters what experts predict will be the most severe months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of COVID-19 deaths and infections among residents and staff in long-term care facilities is rapidly rising. Meanwhile, a growing number of nursing homes report that they do not have a sufficient workforce to care for their residents.

These new findings demonstrate the continuing cost of inaction by the Trump Administration, and should serve as a warning for what is to come if Congress does not come together and cooperate with the incoming Biden Administration to resolve the COVID-19 crisis in nursing homes.

BACKGROUND:

On February 29, 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 in a nursing home were confirmed. The subsequent outbreak led to at least 129 cases and claimed the lives of 37 people.¹ Since that tragedy, nursing homes have been the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. On November 25, 2020, the United States reached a grim milestone with an estimated 100,000 residents and workers in long-term care facilities, including nursing homes, dying of COVID-19.² This is approximately 40 percent of all the COVID-19 deaths in the United States.³

In the 10 months since that first nursing home outbreak, States, local communities, industry, and advocates have called for additional funding, support for vaccine distribution, resources like testing and personal protective equipment (PPE), enhanced coordination, and steady Federal leadership.⁴ These calls remain unanswered by the Trump Administration and Republicans in Congress.

In July, Senate Democrats released a report detailing the Trump Administration's deadly delays in the provision of urgently needed PPE and emergency funding and its failure to produce a national testing strategy.⁵ In September, Senators Casey and Wyden again sounded the alarm, as 11 nursing home residents were dying an hour, and workforce and PPE shortages persisted.⁶ The below findings serve as a third call to action, highlighting the human toll of a surging pandemic on seniors, people with disabilities and workers nationwide.

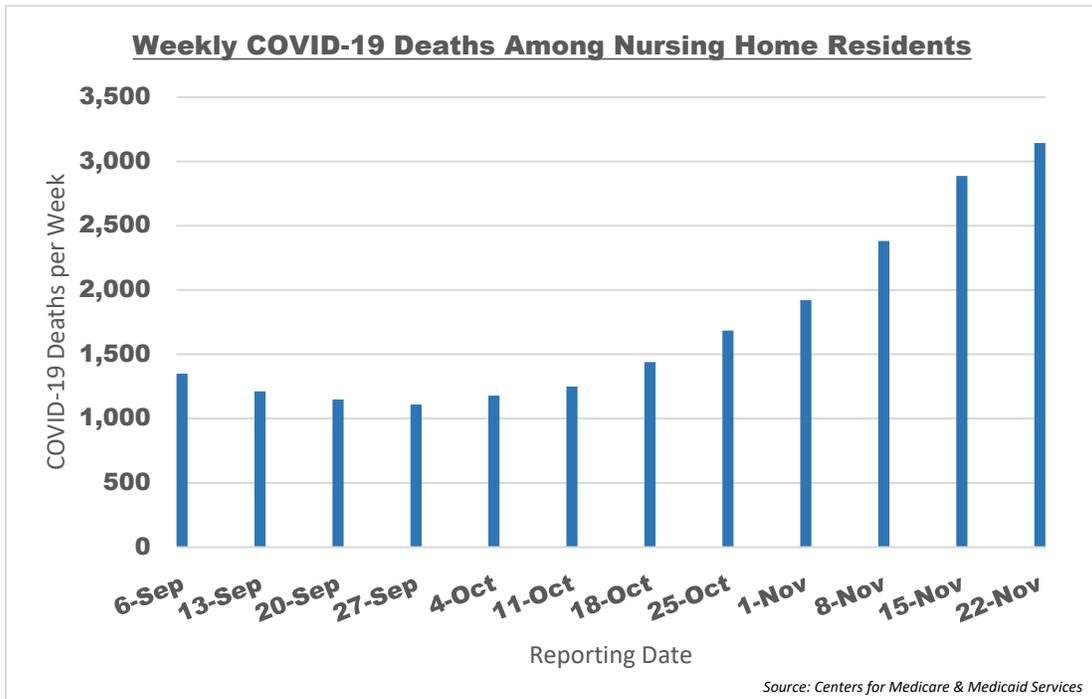
FINDINGS:

In November, more than 15 nursing home residents died of COVID-19 per hour, with 19 residents dying each hour during the week of November 22, 2020.

In almost three months, the rate of deaths in nursing homes from COVID-19 has rapidly increased. In November, on average, over 15 residents died of the disease per hour.⁷ According to federal data, during the week of November 22, 2020, the number of COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes is equivalent to 19 deaths per hour.⁸ In July and August, the rate of COVID-19 deaths among nursing homes residents was equivalent to 11 per hour.⁹

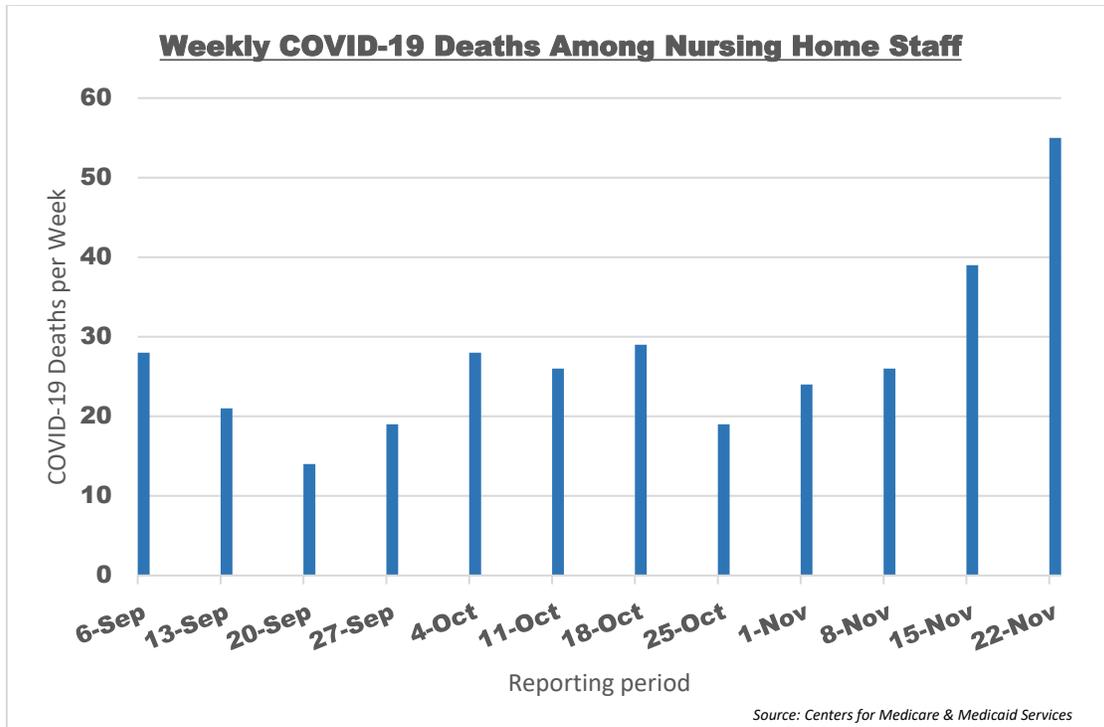
The number of weekly COVID-19 deaths among nursing home residents has increased 133 percent since Labor Day, and 96 percent among nursing home workers.

Nursing home residents make up a disproportionate number of COVID-19 victims in the United States. While nursing home residents represent a fraction of the U.S. population, they account for a sizable share of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the United States.¹⁰ As the Nation faces its 12th month of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts predict a "very dark winter" marred by climbing caseloads and untold stress on the Nation's health care system.¹¹



Over the past three months, the rate at which COVID-19 deaths are occurring in nursing homes is increasing rapidly. Between September 6, 2020 and November 22, 2020, more than 20,000 nursing home residents died of COVID-19.¹² During this period, the number of weekly deaths in nursing homes more than doubled, from approximately 1,300 deaths during the week of September 6, 2020 to 3,100 deaths during the week of November 22, 2020, equal to a 133 percent increase.¹³

Similarly, among workers, the number of deaths reported each week almost doubled during that time period. The week of September 6, 2020, 28 workers in nursing homes died from COVID-19, and the week of November 22, 2020, 55 workers in nursing home lost their lives due to the disease, an increase of 96 percent.¹⁴



Rising COVID-19 infection rates suggest that death rates will continue increasing in nursing homes.

As death rates from COVID-19 in nursing homes increase, rising infection rates may lead to more deaths among nursing home residents and workers in the weeks and months ahead. Rising infection rates are also likely to put increased pressure on PPE supply chains and worsening staffing shortages.

While the death rate is climbing, the rate of COVID-19 infections in nursing homes is increasing at an even more rapid pace, potentially signaling more devastation to come. Between September 6, 2020, and November 22, 2020, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases among residents increased by 181 percent from approximately 7,500 to 21,200, an almost three-fold increase.¹⁵ Workers in nursing homes are similarly experiencing a rise in COVID-19 cases. Between September 6, 2020 and November 22, 2020, weekly reported confirmed cases among staff increased by 184 percent from approximately 7,000 to 20,000.¹⁶

Workforce shortages have increased since Labor Day: In November, one in six nursing homes nationwide reported that they do not have a sufficient workforce.

Workers in nursing homes are on the front lines of the pandemic.¹⁷ These heroes are making incredible sacrifices, risking the health of themselves and their families, often without proper PPE or access to sufficient testing.¹⁸ Moreover, there has been a tremendous toll among the

nursing home workforce. Federal data show that, since the beginning of July, over 218,800 workers have been infected and over 600 have died from COVID-19.¹⁹

COVID-19 has exacerbated workforce shortages that were a problem in long-term care settings long before the pandemic arrived in the United States. In November, approximately one in six nursing homes nationwide reported not having sufficient nursing staff.²⁰ It is especially concerning that the number of nursing homes nationwide reporting shortages of nursing staff has grown to 2,705 as of early November—a more than 25 percent increase since late June.²¹

Similarly, the number of States with a large proportion of facilities reporting shortages has grown. During a three-week period around Labor Day, there were six States in which an average of 25 percent or more of nursing homes reported being short of nurses.²² By late November, there were 21 States in which 25 percent or more of nursing homes reported being short of nurses, including 12 in which 30 percent or more reported nursing shortages.²³

Further, analysis of CMS data finds that the majority of nursing homes that were reporting staffing shortages on November 1, 2020 have been reporting those *same shortages* for months. Specifically, 50 percent of the nursing homes reporting nursing staff shortages on November 1, 2020 had been reporting those same shortages for the previous two months.²⁴

As the pandemic continues, and workers face the increasing risk that they will be infected with or exposed to the virus, they are forced to balance their ability to work with familial responsibilities and the risks that their job poses to loved ones.²⁵ Despite these challenges, the need to adequately staff nursing homes can mean the difference between life and death. Indeed, a recent study found that nursing facilities with COVID-19 cases were more likely to report staffing shortages.²⁶ According to this study, “shortages could have a major impact not just on nursing homes’ ability to adhere to standard infection control protocols but also on their capacity to provide necessary ongoing care not directly related to COVID-19.”²⁷ Another study determined that “among facilities with at least one case, higher nurse aide hours and total nursing hours are associated with a lower probability of experiencing an outbreak and with fewer deaths.”²⁸

CONCLUSION

In the five months since Senate Democrats first released their report on the crisis in nursing homes and identified urgently needed solutions, tens of thousands of residents and workers have died in these facilities.²⁹ Now, as the United States counts more than 104,000 lives lost to the pandemic in long-term care facilities, inaction is tantamount to a death sentence for thousands more.³⁰

America needs a national strategy to save lives in nursing homes, including a sufficient supply of PPE, ample access to testing, resources for vaccine distribution, funding for strike teams and adequate workforce supports, and accountability measures to uphold resident rights and permit safe visits with family. Nursing home residents and workers cannot afford to wait to get

the help they desperately need. Congress must come together to pass a comprehensive COVID relief package. The lives of seniors, people with disabilities and frontline workers depend on it.

¹ Jon Swaine, “Washington nursing home with deadly coronavirus cluster failed to flag illnesses, federal inspectors find,” Washington Post, Mar. 23, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/washington-nursing-home-with-deadly-coronavirus-cluster-failed-to-flag-illnesses-federal-inspectors-find/2020/03/23/bb4ca440-6d5a-11ea-aa80-c2470c6b2034_story.html.

² The COVID Tracking Project, “The Long-Term Care COVID Tracker,” <https://covidtracking.com/data/longtermcare> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020); Jon Kamp & Anna Wilde Matthews, “Covid-19 Deaths Top 100,000 in U.S. Long-Term Care Facilities,” Nov. 25, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-deaths-top-100-000-in-u-s-long-term-care-facilities-11606333186>.

³ Jon Kamp & Anna Wilde Matthews, “Covid-19 Deaths Top 100,000 in U.S. Long-Term Care Facilities,” Nov. 25, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-deaths-top-100-000-in-u-s-long-term-care-facilities-11606333186>.

⁴ Alex Spanko, “As CMS Cracks Down on Nursing Home Testing, Questions Remain on Logistics: ‘You Cannot Fine Your Way Out of a Pandemic’,” Skilled Nursing News, Aug. 30, 2020, <https://skillednursingnews.com/2020/08/as-cms-cracks-down-on-nursing-home-testing-questions-remain-on-logistics-you-cannot-fine-your-way-out-of-a-pandemic/>; Will Englund, “Task force says nursing homes need more aid. Critics say industry should step up.,” Washington Post, Sept. 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/09/17/nursing-home-commission-report/>; Jordan Rau, “Nursing Homes Run Short Of COVID-19 Protective Gear As Federal Response Falter,” NPR, Jun. 11, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/06/11/875335588/nursing-homes-run-short-of-covid-19-protective-gear-as-federal-response-falters>.

⁵ U.S. Senators Bob Casey, Gary Peters, & Ron Wyden, “COVID-19 in Nursing Homes: How the Trump Administration Failed Residents and Workers,” July 1, 2020, <https://www.aging.senate.gov/download/covid-19-in-nursing-homes>.

⁶ U.S. Senators Bob Casey & Ron Wyden, “The Cost of Inaction: 11 Deaths An Hour,” Sept. 22, 2020, <https://www.aging.senate.gov/download/the-cost-of-inaction>.

⁷ Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “COVID-19 Nursing Home Data,” <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).

⁸ Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “COVID-19 Nursing Home Data,” <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).

⁹ Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “COVID-19 Nursing Home Data,” <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).

¹⁰ Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, “Nursing home cases up nearly 80% in COVID-19 rebound,” Associated Press, Aug. 17, 2020, <https://apnews.com/ae2b6d71bdc3a9391ae02910d8f0491f>.

¹¹ Noah Higgins-Dunn, “Biden coronavirus advisor Osterholm says U.S. is ‘about to enter Covid hell’,” CNBC, Nov. 9, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/09/president-elect-biden-coronavirus-advisor-osterholm-says-us-is-about-to-enter-covid-hell.html>; Karen Weintraub & Ken Alltucker, “Cold weather, holiday visitors and pandemic fatigue: Experts warn COVID-19 will get much worse this winter,” USA Today, Nov. 10, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2020/11/10/covid-cases-rising-and-winter-worse-experts-say/6226184002/>.

¹² Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “COVID-19 Nursing Home Data,” <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).

¹³ For the week of September 6, CMS reported that 1,349 residents in nursing homes died, and for the week of November 22, CMS reported that 3,143 residents in nursing homes died. Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “COVID-19 Nursing Home Data,” <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).

¹⁴ Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, “COVID-19 Nursing Home Data,” <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).

-
- ¹⁵ The week of September 6, 2020, nursing homes reported 7,542 cases among residents, and the week of November 22, 2020, nursing homes reported 21,222 cases among residents. Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "COVID-19 Nursing Home Data," <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
- ¹⁶ The week of September 6, 2020, nursing homes reported 7,069 cases among staff, and the week of November 22, 2020, nursing homes reported 20,073 cases among staff. Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "COVID-19 Nursing Home Data," <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
- ¹⁷ Mike Baker, "Nursing Home Linked to 37 Coronavirus Deaths Faces Fine of \$600,000," New York Times, Apr. 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/virus-kirkland-life-care-nursing-home.html>.
- ¹⁸ Chris Kirkham & Benjamin Lesser, "Pandemic exposes systemic staffing problems at U.S. nursing homes," Reuters, Jun. 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-nursinghomes-speci/special-report-pandemic-exposes-systemic-staffing-problems-at-u-s-nursing-homes-idUSKBN23H1L9>.
- ¹⁹ Since July, 218,832 nursing home workers have been infected and 621 workers have died. Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "COVID-19 Nursing Home Data," <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
- ²⁰ Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "COVID-19 Nursing Home Data," <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
- ²¹ There were an average of 2,154 nursing homes that reported nursing shortages during the three weeks ending June 28, 2020, and an average of 2,705 nursing homes that reported nursing shortages during the three weeks ending November 22, 2020. Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "COVID-19 Nursing Home Data," <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
- ²² Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "COVID-19 Nursing Home Data," <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
- ²³ The 12 states with nursing shortages in 30 percent or more of their facilities was Georgia, Iowa, Idaho, Kansas, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "COVID-19 Nursing Home Data," <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
- ²⁴ Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "COVID-19 Nursing Home Data," <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
- ²⁵ Chris Kirkham & Benjamin Lesser, "Pandemic exposes systemic staffing problems at U.S. nursing homes," Reuters, Jun. 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-nursinghomes-speci/special-report-pandemic-exposes-systemic-staffing-problems-at-u-s-nursing-homes-idUSKBN23H1L9>; Nina Feldman & Alan Yu, "It's A Profession That Does Not Love You Back': Nursing Home Staffs Witness Staggering Death Tolls," WESA, May 12, 2020, <https://www.wesa.fm/post/its-profession-does-not-love-you-back-nursing-home-staffs-witness-staggering-death-tolls#stream/0>.
- ²⁶ Brian E. McGarry, David C. Grabowski, & Michael L. Barnett, "Severe Staffing And Personal Protective Equipment Shortages Faced By Nursing Homes During The COVID-19 Pandemic," Health Affairs Vol. 39(10), Aug. 20, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.01269>.
- ²⁷ Brian E. McGarry, David C. Grabowski, & Michael L. Barnett, "Severe Staffing And Personal Protective Equipment Shortages Faced By Nursing Homes During The COVID-19 Pandemic," Health Affairs Vol. 39(10), Aug. 20, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.01269>.
- ²⁸ Rebecca J. Gorges & R. Tamara Konetzka, "Staffing Levels and COVID-19 Cases and Outbreaks in U.S. Nursing Homes," Journal of American Geriatrics Society, Aug. 8, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.16787>.
- ²⁹ Staff analysis, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "COVID-19 Nursing Home Data," <https://data.cms.gov/stories/s/bkwz-xpvg> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).
- ³⁰ The COVID Tracking Project, "The Long-Term Care COVID Tracker," <https://covidtracking.com/data/longtermcare> (last accessed Dec. 3, 2020).