

The **UNITED STATES SENATE**
COMMITTEE on FINANCE
CHAIRMAN RON **WYDEN**, D-OREGON

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Contact: [Taylor Harvey](#) (202) 224-4515

Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on the Impacts of COVID-19 on Nursing Homes
As Prepared for Delivery

The U.S. is now a full year into the COVID-19 pandemic. Vaccinations are up. Americans are beginning to feel encouraged. Yet so many families – hundreds of thousands spread across the country – are unable to share in the sense of uplift about what’s to come because they are mourning loved ones they’ve lost.

Over the last year, more than 175,000 long-term care residents and workers, including 130,000 living and working in federally certified nursing homes, have died of this terrible disease. They were at the center of a collision of mismanagement. In too many nursing homes – even before the pandemic -- there was chronic understaffing, slipshod plans for infection control and abuse and neglect of vulnerable residents. When COVID-19 arrived, the Trump administration came up small by withholding data, failing to distribute PPE and issuing guidance that put seniors in harm’s way. This was a systemic, nationwide failure, and it will be challenging to fix. Members can start by agreeing on basic facts.

First, what’s true of the overall population is true in our nursing homes, too – Black, Latino and Native Americans are suffering the worst of COVID-19. A recent study authored by Professor Konetzka, one of the witnesses joining the committee today, found that the loss of life was more than three times higher in nursing homes with the highest proportions of Black and Latino residents than in facilities with mostly white residents.

Black Americans and immigrants also make up a disproportionate share of nursing home staff. Often they’re paid low wages. More than half a million of them have had confirmed cases of COVID-19, and thousands have died. There’s also real concern that COVID-19 will continue to circulate among these communities where vaccines aren’t as readily available, or where uptake is lower.

These disparities in COVID-19 deaths are the result of generations of inequity in society and in health care. Undoing it is going to take a lot of hard work by this committee and others.

Second, the previous administration actively impeded efforts to address long-running problems in nursing homes. You could fill a library with the watchdog reports calling public attention to these issues: incidents of abuse and neglect, chronic understaffing, squalid living conditions, inadequate emergency preparedness and industry-wide failure when it comes to infection control.

Instead of addressing these issues, the Trump administration dramatically reduced the penalties for failing to meet basic protective federal standards. They went out of their way to undermine any chance at real accountability. When states rushed to develop COVID policies, some followed Trump administration guidance that encouraged nursing homes to accept patients regardless of whether they had tested positive for the disease.

When the pandemic was spreading and nursing homes desperately needed PPE, the Trump administration sent out shipments that reportedly included loose, unusable gloves, hospital gowns that resembled trash bags and defective masks.

The Trump administration did not want people to know about what was going on in nursing homes. Senator Casey and I spent months pressuring and pleading with them to release comprehensive data. The Trump administration stonewalled and dithered and delayed before they finally began to relent. To this date, there is no reliable data on COVID in nursing homes before May 1st of last year because of the Trump administration's stonewalling.

I'll close on one final point. The terrible impact of COVID-19 on seniors in long-term care isn't a red state or a blue state issue. It is a nationwide tragedy. If you look at the 10 states where nursing homes have been hit the hardest, it's five Republican-led states and five Democratic-led states.

So the reality is, long-term care residents in all 50 states were incredibly vulnerable to a pandemic like COVID-19 for long-standing reasons, but the Trump administration worked harder to protect their unscrupulous friends in management than to improve the safety of residents themselves.

The Biden administration is already working to turn things around, starting with ramping up vaccinations and creating strike teams of highly-trained workers who will go into nursing homes and identify safety risks to keep residents safe.

This hearing isn't the first time or the last time that the committee will examine nursing home safety. I want to continue working with members of this committee, because looking after the wellbeing of America's seniors is right at the heart of our jurisdiction.

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