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By XXXX

Americans are showing the strength of their character as we confront a historic threat together. As the COVID-19 pandemic stretches on, individual acts of bravery have become everyday occurrences. Nowhere is this more on display than in our nation’s long term care centers.

The threat facing those in long term care cannot be understated. Because many people who are infected remain asymptomatic, it makes efforts to prevent the virus from being introduced into facilities extremely difficult. And once it is introduced into an environment with a highly vulnerable population, it is hard to impede its spread to begin with and virtually impossible absent adequate testing capabilities, which have been sorely lacking. This is true in many hospitals just as it is in long term care facilities.

Because of this, long term care providers have taken unprecedented steps to protect their residents. The most visible action taken has been prohibiting visits from family members and other loved ones. Unfortunately, even with these significant measures in place and facilities following all guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and other public health officials, more than 3,600 long term care facilities have been impacted by the virus.

Yet, in the face of this challenge, the healthcare workers who care for acutely at-risk residents who live in these facilities are stepping up and performing with valor.

Many of us will never know what it feels like to leave our families every morning and go to work to provide life-sustaining care. For these people, it is a matter of routine. While many of us are hunkered down in our homes watching Netflix and spending time with family, these caregivers are ensuring the loved ones of others continue to receive the support they need. This is their calling and it is something they do on a daily basis in normal times. But in this extraordinary moment, it is all the more admirable.

That is why it is inexcusable that they are not receiving the support they need. For example, while there has been significant attention paid to the need provide hospital with the personal protective equipment (PPE) they need to protect themselves from the virus, the public health system has largely overlooked those working in long term care settings.

In fact, more then 70 percent of long term care facilities report they lack sufficient PPE. This not only puts the brave men and women providing care at risk, it also puts the people they care for at greater risk. And as more caregivers and long term care residents are infected because the lack of PPE, it will place more of a burden on hospitals who care for the sick. Preventing spread in nursing homes and assisted living facilities is an essential element of relieving pressure on hospitals.

As previously mentioned, testing is another area in which long term care providers have not received the support they need. There are protocols in place to limit the spread of the virus once it is in a facility. This includes isolation wings where those who have the virus are kept apart from the rest of the residents and are cared for by staff who do not interact with those in the rest of the building. But with many people remaining asymptomatic, these steps cannot be implemented without broader testing.

There have been anecdotal reports in the media of facilities that took it upon themselves to test everyone in the facility after one or two cases were identified. This broader testing revealed that the virus was much more prevalent in the facilities, with dozens of asymptomatic people discovered only through widespread testing. Only when these asymptomatic cases are identified and isolated can the virus truly be brought under control in this type of setting.

But this level of testing is not possible at all facilities at the moment because long term care facilities have not been made a priority. This is inexcusable in this country. The men and women on the front lines of this fight who are caring for WWII veterans and other members of the greatest generation need the tools to fight this fight. Sadly, at the moment, they do not have nearly enough support to do so.

It is time we step up and support those who are caring for those most vulnerable to this virus. There is reason to be hopeful. Even though residents of long term care are particularly at risk due to age and underlying health conditions, most recover from the virus. But caregivers can do even more amazing work if we just get them the basic tools they need, tests and protective equipment.

It is time to rally around our health care heroes and residents in long term care. Only by making the most vulnerable in our society a priority will we give them the support they have earned and deserve.

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