**Pervasive Medicaid Underfunding Hurting Long Term Care Residents At The Worst Possible Time**

By XXXX

Long term care facilities have served America’s most vulnerable citizens for more than 50 years. We have become a staple in a nation that increasingly needs the specialized care and services we provide.

But unless Congress and state lawmakers act quickly, many seniors and individuals with disabilities may not have care options. Nursing homes across the country are at risk of closing by the end of 2020 – compromising care for our most vulnerable and putting tens of thousands of people out of work.

The culprit for this dire situation is, like so much in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic. Many nursing homes were already running on shoestring budgets, sometimes at a loss, as Medicaid reimbursements shrink year after year. The coronavirus’ devastation has exacerbated this already severe problem by increasing costs due to desperate needs, such as testing, personal protective equipment (PPE) and staffing, which facilities have shouldered with little federal or state support.

At the end of the day, the most affected are long term care residents who need round-the-clock care due to underlying health conditions that can only be met by professional caregivers. Sadly, they have been left behind as the public health system has responded to the novel coronavirus and underfunded vulnerable residents on Medicaid across the country.

[According to a recent report by the American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living](https://www.ahcancal.org/News/news_releases/Documents/Nursing-Homes-Facing-Financial-Crisis.pdf), the costs of supplies have increased significantly due to COVID-19 – sometimes doubling, in the case of facilities with confirmed cases. These supplies, such as protective masks, gowns and gloves, are just the minimum to prepare caregivers to fight this unprecedented pandemic that targets our seniors and immune-compromised residents. Then providers must ensure that enough trained staff are on-hand to effectively work the long, demanding hours necessary to keep residents healthy and safe. Staff costs have increased 18 percent on average across the country in the last few months.

Long term care facilities are not able to recuperate from these additional costs due to necessary and state-ordered lockdowns. These lockdowns have saved thousands of lives and are why – in part – America flattened the curve. They have kept nursing home and assisted living community residents alive. But they have also stopped facilities from receiving new residents, halting tens of billions of dollars in potential revenue, which we would normally be used to invest in staff, facility upgrades and necessary supplies.

The pandemic has further exacerbated the pre-COVID financial and staff challenges that long term care facilities face. We’ve seen residents succumb to the vicious virus, which experts have demonstrated time and again is due to its presence in the surrounding community and asymptomatic spread. Caregivers have fought COVID with shortages in PPE as supply chains were disrupted and long term care facilities were never made a priority by the public health sector.

It is for these reasons among others that we are asking lawmakers to meet the unprecedented pandemic with unprecedented support by increasing Medicaid reimbursement rates.

Medicaid is a vital program that a majority of nursing home residents rely upon, yet it covers only 70 to 80 percent of the actual costs to care for some of the most vulnerable among our population. Increased reimbursements will help the long term care sector better protect and care for residents, while also offsetting the devastating financial losses it has absorbed this year. This funding is crucial so that we can prepare for a long battle against COVID-19 and keep our doors open for seniors and individuals with disabilities who need professional care only we can provide.

Federal officials have already begun to step up through temporary funding, which will undoubtedly help long term care facilities. But just like the Paycheck Protection Program and stimulus checks, these funds provide only short-term relief from the long-term economic effects of the pandemic, and America’s elderly need additional assistance.

We cannot overstate the importance of permanently repairing Medicaid’s flawed reimbursement system. Closures of nursing homes and assisted living communities will risk the lives and displacement of those from the greatest generation. Families already struggling will be forced to use scarce savings to move family members. And suddenly jobless caregivers will be forced to turn to unemployment.

Taking care of America’s long term care residents reaches deep into the heart of who we are as a nation. It affects all people of all ages and classes. And during this urgent time, it requires policymakers to act quickly and decisively to save lives, protect jobs, and ensure the stability of the Medicaid safety net for those most in need among us.

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