

OP-ED

Nursing home workers have stepped up every day

BY LARRY SANTILLI
AND ELEANOR MESSENGER

This is an unprecedented, uncertain and scary time for all of us. But imagine working in a nursing home, caring for the most vulnerable among us.

Nursing homes have felt the pain brought by COVID-19 at a disproportionately higher rate than the broader community. Most patients in nursing homes had significant health challenges to begin with. Then, despite extensive preventive measures, many patients began contracting the virus. Nursing homes have been shut off from the outside world since early March, allowing no families, visitors or nonessential staff. They have been left to confront this deadly disease in isolation.

This has been an incredibly difficult time for the residents of these homes and their families. It also has been an unprecedented challenge for the brave staff who offer care, comfort and support to those residents.

But it's a challenge they have been

stepping up to meet every day.

Nursing home workers are saving lives. They are saving the lives of their patients by offering care and lifting up their spirits in a time of such fear. And they are saving the lives of the rest of us by serving on the front lines and limiting the reach of this insidious virus.

There are too many stories of sacrifice made by nursing home workers to tell them all. Here are a few:

There is the nursing director who has been staying in a hotel for a month, away from her two young daughters, out of concern that on any day she could contract the virus at work and bring it home to her family. She missed her 5-year-old's birthday just last week. She even had to call the local mayor to keep the hotel from shutting down so she could continue staying there. She has not had one day off since this crisis began, bringing the medical cart from floor to floor to individually care for her patients.

There are the nurses who have stayed extra shifts to test more patients to give us the best chance to evaluate and treat them.

They, too, have been staying in hotels away from their families for more than a month.

Activity directors have shouldered an even greater burden to lift the spirits of residents. One director asks for letters from family members and then sits with residents to read dozens of those notes to them each night. It's those little things that can make a difference.

Housekeepers are putting their own health at risk to disinfect the facilities and keep others safe. And countless staff members contracted the virus, self-quarantined and came back to serve their patients as soon as they were able to.

These are acts of sacrifice and service to others. For some reason, there has been a stigma in many communities against those who work in nursing homes. Nursing homes have been viewed as a source of fear and anger. Our workers are part of the communities they serve — many are small towns. They have been pointed at and run away from while walking through grocery stores. They have been ostracized.

They deserve better.

Nursing homes are not like hospitals.

There is not an influx of new patients every day. We treat the same patients, day after day. We get to know them. We know their families. We are a family. Losing patients during this crisis has taken a toll on all of us. But we focus on treating that next patient and on preventing the next person from getting sick. That's what nursing home workers do.

With a growing number of individuals needing the level of care nursing homes provide, the work they do is more critical now than ever.

Throughout this crisis, the country has been honoring the work of our hospital workers and first responders, our grocery store workers and pharmacists. And rightly so.

But don't forget to thank our nursing home workers. The work they were doing before this pandemic was difficult on a good day. It's heroic today.

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