

Testimony of State Senator John Yudichak, I-Carbon & Luzerne Counties

Like many of you, I have loved ones living in nursing homes. My godmother, who is a saint to me, is in a nursing home and I worry about her everyday.

I have two sisters who worked in nursing homes for most of their professional careers, and I know how understaffed and under-resourced nursing homes can be in the best of times.

Many of my close friends, one who recently tested positive for COVID-19, are health care professionals in the twenty-five nursing homes in Luzerne County.

It is far from the best of times for nursing homes that now represent over two-thirds of all COVID-19 deaths in Pennsylvania.

In Luzerne County, there are (315) nursing home residents and (49) staff who have tested positive for COVID-19. And, there are (71) nursing home residents who have died from COVID-19 — accounting for 66% of all COVID-19 deaths in Luzerne County.

On March 6th, the same day Governor Wolf issued his emergency declaration order in Pennsylvania, there was an article in the Wall Street Journal by Yuka Hayashi entitled, *Nursing Homes Brace for Coronavirus Outbreak Amid Staffing Concerns*.

The article chronicled the horrific tragedy at the Life Care Center nursing home in Kirkland, Washington, where two-thirds of the nursing home residents contracted the novel coronavirus and 35 people died in one nursing home.

When you hail from coal country in NEPA, you understand the phrase the canary in the coal mine. It's a warning sign that a situation has become deadly, and it is time for you to act quickly if you are going to save lives.

Kirkland was the canary in the coal mine for Pennsylvania Nursing Home. Regrettably, the Pennsylvania Department Health did not act quickly enough to learn the lessons of Kirkland and it has failed to develop a comprehensive, statewide nursing home response plan to protect and save lives in Pennsylvania nursing homes.

Many states have taken dramatic action on nursing homes. The Governors of West Virginia and Wisconsin announced they will test all nursing home residents and staff for COVID-19. Massachusetts is pioneering “cohorting” positive COVID-19 nursing home residents in separate facilities. Neighboring states, like New York, New Jersey, and Ohio make critical COVID-19 nursing home information available to families and the public.

Pennsylvania refuses to release individual nursing home information, it has no statewide plan in place for COVID-19 testing in nursing homes and it has no plan for “cohorting” positive COVID-19 residents in separate facilities.

Other state agencies, like the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, have taken aggressive steps to mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus in their facilities. The Department of Corrections has a quarantine procedure for new inmates that places them at SCI Retreat in Luzerne County for fourteen days before they enter general population. In addition, the Governor signed an executive order to allow for the early release of 1,800 high health risk inmates to mitigate the spread of the virus in our prison system.

Regretfully, the Department of Health’s response to the spread of COVID-19 in our nursing homes has not been as comprehensive or nearly as aggressive as the Department of Corrections. And, to my knowledge, the Administration has issued no executive order directed at the safety and welfare of nursing home residents and staff.

Recognizing the lack of a state plan, we decided to take action locally to quickly assist struggling nursing homes in NEPA. Two organizations in Luzerne County, the Earth Conservancy and the AllOne Foundation, generously donated \$500,000 to establish the NEPA Nursing Home SOS Program.

The NEPA Nursing Home SOS Program is focused on our most vulnerable citizen in this global pandemic — nursing home residents and the staff who care for them.

The mission of the NEPA Nursing Home SOS Program is two-fold: 1). we will acquire and distribute COVID-19 safety supplies, like infection control materials, PPE, and symptom screening equipment to NEPA nursing homes and 2). we will partner with statewide organizations like Pennsylvania Health Care Association and LeadingAge PA to call on the Department of Health to develop a statewide nursing home response plan that gets life-saving resources to the true epicenter of the

COVID-19 crisis — Pennsylvania nursing homes. Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions.