

Newcomb: Steps for combatting the return of COVID-19 in assisted living facilities

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The COVID-19 pandemic brought unparalleled challenges and wreaked havoc on nearly every industry.

Thousands of residents in assisted living communities on Long Island and in New York City experienced a sudden separation from their friends and families, while staff and management of these facilities struggled to keep up with demand for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as they implemented rigid, enhanced health screening protocols to prevent virus spread internally.

Although nursing homes and assisted living communities operate under very different conditions, they both serve a growing population of elderly New Yorkers. New York's more than 500 licensed adult care facility/assisted living providers serve seniors who need ongoing supervision and assistance with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, and taking medications, but in general do not require round-the-clock skilled nursing care like that provided in a nursing home. It is in large part this reason that assisted living communities experienced a far lower rate of COVID cases or fatalities than did nursing homes.

New York bravely stood at the forefront of the COVID outbreak and the lessons learned during this spring will help better prepare us for the likely resurgence this fall and winter. But it behooves the state now to recognize the operational distinctions between nursing homes and assisted living/adult care facilities and provide support to these communities and their hardworking, devoted staff. Here is what the state can do to help assisted living communities:

Prioritize assisted living communities for distribution of PPE: The state needs to acquire a stockpile of PPE supplies in advance of a possible resurgence — and needs to make assisted living communities a priority for distribution. This past spring, assisted living providers spent weeks pleading for scarce PPE supplies desperately needed to keep

residents and staff safe, and this equipment, combined with strong infection control and cleaning measures, is needed to minimize risk of infection within the community.

Provide adequate access to affordable testing with quick turnaround time to receive results: New York needs to provide assisted living providers with affordable and rapid testing capacity. Assisted living communities must test their staff and other personnel that come on premises weekly. The tests average \$100 and the state has imposed all the cost on the assisted living provider putting some in financial distress. And, because of the surge in cases nationwide, the turnaround time for results has increased to a level where testing cannot provide adequate protection for residents and staff.

Change the rules for family visitation: Currently, one positive resident or staff case shuts the entire family visitation program down for 28 days. The Department of Health needs to revisit this policy and revise it to make it more flexible. One approach is to make the rule consistent with the current staff Return to Work policy when a positive testing person is furloughed for 14 days and then can return to work if they test negative after the 14th day. Families and residents have been kept apart for far too long.

COVID-related policy for assisted living communities should be driven by the operational facts related to this model of long-term care and be distinct from nursing home requirements. ESAAL and its members stand ready to work with the NYS Department of Health to develop policy that ensures residents' and staff's well-being and safety as we continue to navigate through this dreadful and challenging time.

Lisa Newcomb is Executive Director of the Empire State Association of Assisted Living, representing more than 500 licensed adult care and assisted living providers.