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# COVID-19's devastating impact on Massachusetts nursing homes



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5 Investigates Reporter

Nursing home residents account for more than half of the COVID-19 deaths statewide. The vaccine and lessons learned have brought hope in the wake of immense loss.

The loss weighs heavily on Anne Hudson, who, like so many during this pandemic, couldn't be with their loved ones as they slipped away from COVID-19's deadly grasp.



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"My heart goes out to everyone who lost someone to this pandemic So not to be able to see her or touch her just was another layer of that loss," she said.

Her 95-year-old mom Charlotte lost her battle with the virus at Belmont Manor last April. Charlotte was a map maker and geologist who loved her family.

"She was never happier than when all of us were together," Hudson said. "I think she was one of a kind."



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Anne Hudson with a picture of her mother, Charlotte, a resident of Belmont Manor nursing home who died of COVID-19.

Here is COVID-19's heartbreaking toll: more than 8,600 deaths statewide, with some homes seeing dozens of deaths. The Julian J. Leavitt Family Center for Living in Longmeadow saw 63 residents pass away. Fifty-nine at The Katzman Family Center for Living in Chelsea. And 52 dead at Belmont Manor.

Hudson bears no ill will toward Belmont Manor, a highly-rated home.

"I felt like they tried very hard," she said. "It's just really, really tough."

Hudson's hope, she said, was to find some meaning in the spring's tragedy, "and it's not just senseless heartbreak."

The AARP Massachusetts is among the advocates and others trying to sort through the disastrous early months of the pandemic and figure out how to make nursing homes be better going forward.



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Inadequate personal protective equipment and testing are high on the list of problems, but AARP Massachusetts State Director Michael Festa called the toll of COVID-19 on nursing homes here inexplicable.

"I think we're better positioned now to come to address an additional challenge, such as a new virus, God forbid," he said. "However, I would say this: the vaccine rollout is a reminder that even knowing where the limitations are, we haven't been able to address all that."



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**Michael Festa of the AARP Massachusetts is advocating for improvements to nursing homes in Massachusetts.**

One avenue the state Department of Public Health is pursuing to improve infection control in nursing homes is to propose regulations limiting the number of residents that can live together in a room. Currently, the maximum is four, but the state is proposing to eliminate all three- and four-person rooms, and to increase the minimum size for a double-occupancy room.



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"To reduce the number of people living in a room is a matter of dignity. It's also a matter of practicality because you are reducing the likelihood if there is an incident, that you're going to have it spread as rapidly," Festa said.

But the Massachusetts Senior Care Association, which represents nursing homes, opposed the state's original proposal, said in comments to the state that the proposed regulations would be "massively disruptive, exorbitantly expensive and could potentially displace thousands" of nursing home residents.

The group said the original proposal would affect nearly 360 Massachusetts nursing homes, out of a total of about 380, requiring retrofitting of buildings. Construction costs alone would top \$1 billion.

The state has increased some payments it makes to nursing homes, and Festa said the finances can be made to work.

The Mass. Senior Care Association now says it supports modified regulations and is beginning to eliminate three- and four-bedroom rooms, and is asking for funding to support the changes.

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At the Ellis Rehab and Nursing Facility in Norwood, owner Tony Franchi recalled with tears welling in his eyes some of the darkest days and the heroic work by his team. When the virus took hold, the home was fortunate to have an empty unit to isolate patients and extra contracted staff already in place, but like all facilities faced challenges with a lack of personal protective equipment.

"The first lesson is, is always be prepared. Be prepared for a worst case scenario," he said. "The second lesson is, we can't do it by yourself...aides, nurses, everybody. All the staff are critical."

Franchi lived at the home to support his team, the staff constantly communicated with families and helped them stay connected with their loved ones-sometimes during the last moments of



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The lessons learned in the fall left them confident enough in their ability to handle people with the highly infectious virus that they accepted COVID-19 positive patients from hospitals. Every patient recovered and there were no additional infections.

"I focus in on the hope and I focus in on the lives that we saved," he said.

The deep losses stay with him, too. He personally wrote to family members of all the residents who passed away "to let the family know that their loved ones are not forgotten," he said.

"We still haven't had a chance to actually really mourn and take time to mourn their loss," he said.





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