

The state doesn't track how many nursing home workers have coronavirus. That has fueled concern about transmission and staffing.

COVID-19 :: by JENNA CARLESSO | MARCH 26, 2020 | "EXIT CLEAN READ"



With coronavirus spreading, nursing homes are stepping up precautions. But while the state tracks residents who have tested positive for the disease, it does not keep tabs on sick employees.

As coronavirus cases flourish in some state nursing homes and assisted living centers, operators of those facilities have stepped up precautions, sent workers home and isolated residents who may have been exposed.

But keeping track of everyone who has become ill or tested positive across that care sector has proven elusive. That's because the state doesn't require nursing homes and other facilities to report every employee who is

quarantined or has tested positive for coronavirus.

The state has a record of every citizen in Connecticut who tests positive, and it keeps a running tally of nursing home residents who have contracted the disease. But officials are not tracking how many workers systemwide have tested positive or are self-isolating, raising concerns about transmission and staffing levels.

“What this pandemic has shown us is there are some parts of our reporting system that work and some parts that need improvement,” said Max Reiss, a spokesman for Gov. Ned Lamont. “When it comes to a reporting requirement on positive tests for caregivers in our nursing homes, that obviously needs to be looked at to make sure people who are receiving care are receiving it from people who are healthy.”

Some nursing home operators are voluntarily reporting when employees are sick. Others are not.

Officials at Evergreen Health Care Center in Stafford Springs, the nursing home with the most reported coronavirus cases, said three workers have tested positive for the disease. Another 14 employees were sent home for possible exposure, but later returned to work after experiencing no symptoms.

Two residents from that facility have died, and another five have tested positive.

“

“There are a lot of people in nursing homes and they’re all vulnerable people. They’re subject to whatever staff is available.”

***Pedro Zayas
Spokesman, SEIU 1199***

At Benchmark Senior Living in Ridgefield, an assisted living center near the New York border, at least four workers were sent home after they were exposed to a resident who tested positive.

The Mirror

**News
Match**

Double your impact.

GIVE NONPROFIT. GIVE NOW.

Support trusted journalism today.

Two residents of Benchmark have also died, and another 16 people there contracted the virus.

Union officials, whose fellow members include thousands of nursing home workers, say they’re aware of at least two other facilities where an employee has tested positive – one in Danbury and one in Stamford – though they declined to name the nursing homes.

“Given what happened in Washington, one would think they would be tracking this,” said Pedro Zayas, a spokesman for the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199 SEIU, which includes about 6,000 nursing home workers.

Zayas was referring to the Life Care Center in Kirkland, Wash., where 37 people have died and more than 80 residents have tested positive for coronavirus. Dozens of employees at the facility contracted the disease.

“There are a lot of people in nursing homes and they’re all vulnerable people,” Zayas said. “They’re subject to whatever staff is available. Nursing homes should be a priority in terms of the state having a system to make itself aware of situations” at facilities.

Tracking worker illnesses would not only help protect employees and residents, it also could expose staffing shortages at facilities where many workers are sick.



SEIU 1199 President Rob Baril, center, has called for better access to testing.

Some nursing homes are already short on employees and are expecting conditions to worsen as the virus continues to spread.

“If, say, 14 workers have to be sent home and they can’t return until the recommended time frame has passed ...

that’s a huge amount of workers that are out of the building,” said Matthew Barrett, president of the Connecticut Association of Health Care Facilities. “So you have to layer that kind of crisis on top of an underlying near-crisis that was already being experienced in terms of staffing shortages at Connecticut nursing facilities.”

Advertisement



The advertisement features a man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a grey zip-up sweater, sitting at a desk in a classroom or office setting. In the background, other people are blurred, suggesting a busy educational environment. To the right of the image is a blue banner with the Goodwin University logo (a stylized sun or globe) and the text "Goodwin University". Below the logo, the text reads "The world needs more you." and "Earn your master's degree today!" in white.

After the CT Mirror raised questions about the lack of mandated reporting around sick nursing home employees, Reiss said the state's Public Health Department is working on an order that would require health care staff at state licensed facilities to report positive coronavirus test results to their employers. Those employers must then share the information with the state.

"It would put the same requirement on the reporting as if you were a patient," Reiss said. It was unclear when the new policy would take effect.

More precautions

Nursing homes and other care centers are taking more precautions to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

At Evergreen Health Care Center, employees must have their temperatures taken at the beginning and end of each shift. Their oxygen levels are also being monitored.

Staff did a deep cleaning of that facility, as did workers at the Sharon Health Care Center, where one resident tested positive for the disease.

Residents who have symptoms or are confirmed to have the virus are being isolated. If spacing becomes an issue, two residents who test positive may be placed in the same room, said Jane Steele, head of infection prevention for

Athena, the parent company of the Stafford Springs and Sharon nursing homes.

Staff at Evergreen and other facilities are being restricted to certain areas. Those who work in a designated unit must stay in their unit. Only a limited number of employees may care for residents who test positive or show symptoms.

“We try not to have staff go among different units,” Steele said. “In addition, the staff are being screened before they come in. They’re getting their temp monitored, they are getting asked specific questions regarding their respiratory status and also having their oxygen level obtained.”



The banner features three headshots of individuals on the left. The main text reads: **‘What Just Happened?’ 2020 Election Recap**. Below this, it says **Virtual Event • Nov. 10 • 7 p.m.** and **Click Here To Register**. On the right, it is **Sponsored by:** **LWV LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF CONNECTICUT**. The **the mirror** logo is also present.

“

“We saw what happened in Kirkland, Washington ... and we’re going to do the best we can, sometimes sailing against the wind, to make sure that doesn’t happen in our nursing homes.”

Gov. Ned Lamont

Workers at the Ridgefield assisted living center were also having their temperatures taken, and are required to wear protective gear.

Barbara Cass, head of facility licensing and investigations for the state health department, said nursing homes have been asked to eliminate all communal activities. Visitations have also been banned except under special circumstances, such as an end-of-life situation.

“Dining is being done in resident rooms, recreation activities are being done in resident rooms,” Cass said. “The ban on visitors was very impactful to residents and family members, but that was a significant control measure we believe will be of great value as we move through this crisis.”

As the coronavirus continues to spread, labor leaders and nursing home operators have called for better access to testing. Due to a shortage of tests, state officials say priority is given to certain people, including those who are hospitalized with symptoms. In many cases, nursing home workers and employees at other care facilities must get a doctor’s referral, even if they have been directly exposed to residents who test positive.

“We have had reports of folks attempting to get testing and just not be able to get through the red tape to get the test,” said Rob Baril, president of SEIU 1199, the state’s largest health care workers’ union. “The scarcity of equipment, including tests, is a major concern.”

“Access to testing is so bad that workers have to self-quarantine,” he added. “And testing is taking up to seven or eight days to get a result.”

State leaders have not yet offered a remedy for the testing shortage, but say they are watching the nursing homes closely.

“We know that nursing homes can be a petri dish, and they’re spreading a virus to the most vulnerable population,” Lamont told reporters. “We saw what happened in Kirkland, Washington ... and we’re going to do the best we can, sometimes sailing against the wind, to make sure that doesn’t happen in our nursing homes.”



'What Just Happened?' 2020 Election Recap



Virtual Event • Nov. 10 • 7 p.m.

[Click Here To Register](#)

Sponsored by:



Please visit our [COVID-19 Resources Page](#) for a complete listing of all CT Mirror coverage, Viewpoints, podcasts, and resources related to COVID-19.



Sign up for CT Mirror's free daily news summary.

EMAIL

SUBSCRIBE

Free to Read. Not Free to Produce.

The Connecticut Mirror is a nonprofit newsroom. 90% of our revenue comes from people like you. If you value our reporting please consider making a donation. You'll enjoy reading CT Mirror even more knowing you helped make it happen.

YES, I'LL DONATE TODAY



Jenna Carlesso is CT Mirror's Health Reporter, focusing on health access, affordability, quality, equity and disparities, social determinants of health, health system planning, infrastructure, processes, information systems, and other health policy. Before joining CT Mirror Jenna was a reporter at The Hartford Courant for 10 years, where she consistently won statewide and regional awards. Jenna has a Master of Science degree in Interactive Media from Quinnipiac University and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism from Grand Valley State University.

