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SeniorSource

A Newsletter from

U.S. Senator Susan Collins

MAINE SENIORS IN NURSING HOMES NEED BETTER PROTECTION FROM COVID-19

**Universal Testing, Better Access to PPE
for Front Line Workers, and Policies
Enabling Telehealth are Needed**

By: Senator Susan M. Collins
Chairman, Senate Aging Committee

A series of recent COVID-19 outbreaks at Maine's long-term care facilities are a tragic reminder that older adults in senior living communities are at the highest risk during the ongoing pandemic. The cases in Maine reflect the nationwide public health crisis. An estimated 55,000 residents and workers at nursing homes have died from COVID-19. The actual toll could be substantially higher.

As the oldest state in the nation, our population is particularly vulnerable. More than half of Mainers who have died from COVID-19 were residents of long-term care facilities. Adults age 65 years and older are more likely to suffer severe complications from COVID-19 and to have more difficult recoveries. Nationwide, they represent two out of every five hospitalizations and eight out of every 10 deaths from the virus.

COVID-19 has also disrupted the lives of seniors who are not infected as well as their

families. I know two brothers from Bangor whose father is in a nursing home and has dementia. They have not been able to see him for some time now, and his health is failing. They are worried that he may not still be alive by the time they are allowed to visit him.

On May 21, I held a Senate Aging Committee hearing to examine how we can better protect seniors from the coronavirus. It was Congress' first oversight hearing on COVID-19's devastating impact on seniors.



Universal Testing at Nursing Homes

Throughout this crisis, I have repeatedly called for universal testing at nursing homes to help stop the spread of the virus and eventually allow families to safely visit their loved ones. One of the witnesses at the hearing was Dr. Tamara Konetzka of the University of Chicago, who has conducted research on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on

long-term care facilities. She agreed universal testing is needed for residents and then on a weekly or biweekly basis for the staff who go back and forth into the community.

According to experts, we should not wait until there is a symptomatic case that tests positive. At that point, it is too late, and an outbreak is almost inevitable. The federal government has appropriated more than \$25 billion for testing, but more may be needed for testing, specifically in nursing homes.

Testing should be conducted at all nursing homes, as Dr. Konetzka's research finds no correlation between CMS' quality ratings of nursing homes and the probability of at least one COVID-19 case. One of the worst outbreaks in Maine was at a nursing home that had five stars, the highest rating.

Calling on CMS to Step up Its Response

In May, Democratic Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and I wrote to CMS outlining a series of recommendations to better protect older adults in nursing homes. Among the issues that we urged be examined is how long-term care facilities and in-home care settings can better access adequate testing as well as personal protective equipment, and how the higher health risks of older adults living in nursing homes can be taken into account in the distribution plans for any future COVID-19 treatments and vaccines.

Increasing Telehealth

In addition to helping protect seniors who currently reside in assisted living facilities, we should also pursue policies that allow seniors to utilize telehealth and home health services so that they can remain in the safety of their own homes. Another hearing witness, Dr. Steven Landers, CEO of Visiting Nurse Association Health Group, testified that a provision I secured in the CARES Act allowing physician assistants and nurse practitioners to order home health services is "an important step in preserving access."

Congress has already taken a number of actions to respond to the pandemic, providing \$175 billion in relief funds to hospitals and other providers. Following our hearing, the Health and Human Services Department finally released nearly \$18 million for Maine nursing homes. I also worked to secure another \$53 million to expand COVID-19 testing capacity in Maine.

COVID-19 has brought tremendous hardship and tragedy, placing a heavy toll on

seniors and front-line workers and straining our health system. As Senate Aging Committee chairman, I will continue my bipartisan efforts to strengthen the government's response and better protect seniors.

