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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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07.05.2020

US nursing home catastrophe: Increasing numbers of the elderly fall victim to COVID-19

Long-term care homes overrun with COVID-19 infections and deaths, refrigerated trailers holding bodies that overburdened funeral homes cannot accept, nursing home morgues stacked with corpses, seniors left to suffer and die alone—these are just some of the horrors and indignities that face residents of America’s facilities caring for the elderly during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Trump administration has openly stated that up to 100,000 Americans can expect to die in the coming weeks and months as states move to reopen the economy. This shocking revision upwards of the administration’s death projections were recounted by the president on Sunday with cold-blooded contempt for the lives of those who stand to die. And the numbers are likely an underestimation.

Disproportionately included among these countless thousands of deaths will be the elderly, many of them residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. In the US, perhaps more than in any other nation, seniors are not revered by the powers that be for their long years of labor and family care, but rather are seen as a drain on the economy. It can be said with confidence that the wiping out of large numbers of the older population is seen by the ruling elite as a convenient and positive byproduct of the coronavirus pandemic.

An internal report of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published by the *New York Times* projects that 3,000 daily deaths can be expected by June 1. This horrific death toll is

the price the American ruling elite says is required to restart the economy under conditions where COVID-19 infections continue to steadily rise.

COVID-19 has already exacted a grim toll among the nearly 3 million individuals living in long-term care facilities across the US, including in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and intermediate care facilities. Another 3 million people work in these facilities, the majority under deplorable conditions and for poor pay, and with little to no protection against contracting the virus themselves.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), in the 23 US states that publicly reported death data in long-term facilities, there were over 10,000 reported deaths due to COVID-19 among residents and staff. In five states—Delaware, Massachusetts, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Colorado and Utah—deaths in these facilities accounted for a staggering 50 percent or more of coronavirus deaths.

Horror stories continue to emerge from long-term care facilities across the country in the pandemic. Of the more than 25,000 deaths in New York, the nation's hardest hit state, at least 4,813 residents with confirmed or presumed cases of COVID-19 have died at 351 of New York's 613 nursing homes since March 1. On Monday the state reported more than 1,700 previously undisclosed deaths at nursing homes and adult care facilities.

At one **New York City** nursing home, the Isabella Geriatric Center in Manhattan's Washington Heights, nearly 100 of its 705 residents have died. Officials at the nursing home revealed Friday that 46 residents who tested positive for COVID-19, along with 52 suspected of having the virus, had passed away.

This huge death toll, the largest nursing home cluster in New York state, was first reported by local cable news station NY1. The station's report also revealed that due to delays by overburdened funeral homes in picking up bodies, the center had brought in a refrigerated trailer to store bodies and had concealed the trailer under tarps hung on the nursing home's fence. An official at the geriatric center said that the deadly situation had been compounded by a lack of in-house testing, staffing shortages and difficulty obtaining personal protective equipment (PPE) for employees.

In **Medfield, Massachusetts**, north of Boston, COVID-19 has killed 54 residents over the past four weeks at the Courtyard Nursing Care Center. An additional 117 residents and 42 employees have tested positive for the virus. Dr. Richard Feifer, chief medical officer for Genesis Healthcare, which owns Courtyard, told the *Boston Globe* that the nursing home

cares for “largely frail, elderly seniors with multiple health conditions,” a description that applies to virtually all nursing home residents.

Deaths at the Medfield facility have received less media attention than would be expected until recently because of the COVID-19 outbreak that has ravaged the Soldiers’ Home, a veterans’ care facility in **Holyoke** in the western part of Massachusetts. A shocking 84 residents have died at the facility since the virus outbreak. Eighty-one employees have tested positive for the coronavirus.

The deaths at the Soldiers’ Home were initially hidden from both the mayor of Holyoke and local health officials, who only became aware of the developing situation when employees at the facility reached out to them. Staff said management at the facility refused to provide them with PPE and instructed them to crowd patients together from multiple wards into a single ward as a solution to staffing shortages due to infections. A state investigation into the deaths is underway.

A particularly gruesome discovery took place in mid-April when police found 17 corpses piled up at the Subacute and Rehabilitation Center in **Andover, New Jersey**. The bodies were stacked in a small morgue designed to hold a maximum of four bodies. The more than 2,000 deaths of staff and residents in New Jersey’s long-term facilities account for about 40 percent of the state’s coronavirus-related deaths.

The **Detroit** Health Department reported at the end of April that 200 residents along with three workers had died of coronavirus in the city’s 26 nursing homes. All 26 nursing homes in the city have cases of COVID-19, according to Mayor Mike Duggan. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services released data showing a total of 2,637 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among nursing home residents throughout the state.

As the state of **Florida** began to reopen some of its beaches and businesses this week, a list from the Florida Department of Health detailed more than 300 long-term care facilities where staff or residents had tested positive for COVID-19. Florida reported nearly 1,400 deaths statewide and 284 deaths in these facilities, but these numbers are suspect. They do not correspond to numbers reported by senior facilities and figures from the state’s medical examiner’s office.

Coronavirus cases and deaths in nursing homes and other elder care facilities have been similarly prevalent in Europe. According to the World Health Organization, up to 50 percent of the COVID-19 deaths in Europe have been associated with long-term care

facilities. In the UK, official figures only recently began to include at-home and nursing home deaths.

As in the US, many of the elderly are suffering COVID-19 without visits from friends and family, which adds an additional emotional toll. Elders' dignity is robbed as they take their last breaths hooked up to a ventilator with only hospital staff around them. Despite being overworked and placing themselves in danger of infection, doctors and nurses have been treating those dying with compassion, tending to them in their final hours and setting up phone and video calls with patients' family members.

This kindheartedness stands in sharp contrast to the cruelty heaped on the elderly by government authorities—local, state and federal—who have underreported deaths in senior care facilities and provided little assistance to nursing homes and their workers in the form of testing and PPE. With the lives of hundreds of thousands of the population seen as the price that must be paid to get workers back on the job to produce profit, seniors who deserve high-quality medical care are instead seen as expendable as their profit-generating days are over.

World Socialist 6 May 2020