

Our seniors? We need more information from the City

The Bethlehem Gadfly coronavirus April 18, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts on the coronavirus 

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Followers know that Gadfly has been concerned about the status of our nursing homes and senior-care facilities:

What coronavirus questions do you have?

Still have coronavirus questions and concerns?

Rachel Maddow had another segment last night.

Two very relevant stories in the *Morning Call* this morning indicate that we need much more information than the City provided in the **press conference** without follow-up questions yesterday. Gadfly reported that as of Thursday eight residents and eight staff members have been diagnosed with COVID-19 at Kirkland Village. That sounds to him like a lot. The City reported outbreaks in three long-term care facilities. Which three? What constitutes an “outbreak”? What monitoring and oversight is there? Who is the state “consultant,” and what exactly is its role? (There is no mention of a consultant in these stories.)

Anthony Salamone, “Deaths at nursing homes in Pennsylvania, Lehigh Valley continue to mount.” Morning Call, April 17, 2020.

More than half of Pennsylvania's coronavirus deaths have occurred at nursing homes, as a top state official said Friday that those facilities continue to battle the pandemic.

State data also shows the Lehigh Valley has reported 23 deaths at 21 facilities — about 40% of the two-county total of 56. That's an increase of four fatalities since the department began releasing nursing home data on Wednesday.

At Gracedale in Northampton County, two more residents died from COVID-19, the county reported Thursday night, — bringing the total to four. Some 26 residents have tested positive for the disease, while six have recovered. Among staff at the Upper Nazareth Township facility, 22 have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and two have recovered.

Meanwhile, Jason Cumello, administrator at Lehigh County's two Cedarbrook nursing facilities, declined Friday to provide an update. As of earlier this week, 24 residents and staff members were infected but none have died, county officials had said.

In the Lehigh Valley, there are 95 facilities — either nursing or personal care homes — according to Health Department spokesman Nate Wardle. Of those, 11 facilities in Lehigh and 10 in Northampton have thus far reported coronavirus cases or deaths, he said.

Facilities are under no requirement from the state or the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to give public notification, Wardle said, "but we expect them to take steps to protect their residents, employees and to inform loved ones of residents."

"Given the lack of testing and personal protective equipment in many facilities, we can see cases quickly spike in a nursing home even if the facility is practicing social distancing and disallowing visitors," said David Grabowski, a Harvard Medical School expert on aging and long-term care issues.

"Thus, although Lehigh and Northampton may not be spiking, there is a need to remain vigilant in the coming days. Nursing home staff must continue to use best practices in terms of infection control and prevention."

At Genesis Healthcare Lehigh Center, believed to be the facility with the most cases in the Valley, spokeswoman Lori Mayer said three more residents tested positive, bringing that total to 58. Twelve residents have died — the only known Lehigh County nursing home fatalities to date. She also said 12 employees out of 33 who were diagnosed with COVID-19 have returned to work; seven residents have also recovered.

Meanwhile, HCR ManorCare, with five Lehigh Valley facilities totaling nearly 1,000 nursing-home beds, has turned away repeated requests from The Morning Call to confirm unofficial reports of infections. “I will make sure the facilities are communicating with staff and families,” spokeswoman Julie Beckert said.

Here is a rundown from officials at other area facilities contacted Friday:

At Fellowship Community in Whitehall Township, spokeswoman Kelly Gould said a 90-year-old resident, who had been hospitalized with an underlying medical condition, has died from coronavirus. Gould said the facility, which has about 250 personal care and skilled-nursing residents, has seen 14 diagnosed cases.

Holy Family Manor in Bethlehem said two residents tested positive. A news release from the Allentown Diocese, which owns the west Bethlehem facility, said the residents were immediately placed in isolation.

Diakon Lutheran Social Ministries, which owns Luther Crest in South Whitehall Township, has had one resident and two “partner-vendor” staffers test positive, spokesman Bill Swanger said. Twelve residents have also tested positive at Lutheran Home in Topton and Twining Village in Bucks County, as have an unspecified number of employees, he said.

Phoebe Ministries’ Allentown facility on Wednesday brought in two dozen skilled nursing residents with coronavirus from its home in Wyncote, Montgomery County, spokeswoman Emilie J. Bateman said. The facility has seen no new cases. Efforts to obtain comment from a representative with SEIU Healthcare PA, the union which represents nurses and other employees at Phoebe and additional homes in the Valley, were unsuccessful.

Rebecca Moss, “Pa. nursing homes left to largely police themselves as coronavirus deaths mount.” Spotlight Pa, April 17, 2020.

Since the coronavirus emerged as a global threat, older adults have proved to be most acutely affected and at risk of complications and death. This is particularly notable for Pennsylvania, which has one of the oldest populations in the United States and is home to about 126,000 people in nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

Yet as the virus gained a foothold here and spread rapidly through these facilities — whose residents now account for half of deaths in the state — staff members, residents, their families, and the wider public still know very little about what’s going on inside, and whether the companies that run them have the tools or staffing needed to protect people and save lives.

State and federal officials have not released patient and death data for individual homes, making it nearly impossible to examine if facilities are properly responding to the crisis. State officials do not require nursing homes to disclose cases to residents, family members, or the public. At the same time, federal regulators have halted regular inspections, and the state has said it would only investigate complaints that indicate patients are in immediate jeopardy.

Taken together, they have left the companies that run these homes to largely police themselves.

The lack of disclosure “endangers not only the residents and the staff but the whole community,” said Charlene Harrington, a professor of sociology and nursing at the University of California, San Francisco. “The community should be outraged.”

Nate Wardle, a spokesperson for the Pennsylvania Department of Health, said a list of specific facilities cannot be released because the data are being collected through multiple sources. “Last thing we want to do is provide something and then have to correct it,” he said by email.

Only this week did the Department of Health begin posting online the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in long-term care facilities,

broken down by county. As of Thursday, there were 3,290 cases in 306 of Pennsylvania's roughly 1,900 facilities, according to the data.

The state also reported 365 deaths among nursing home residents. Through news reports and interviews with sources and providers, Spotlight PA was able to identify just under 50 facilities with reported cases. In the absence of a complete list, the news organization is asking for the public's help in identifying affected facilities. If you have information about cases or deaths, submit it below or contact tips@spotlightpa.org.

Many facility administrators contacted by Spotlight PA did not return messages seeking comment. Some provided general statements about resident care, but did not confirm whether cases had been detected. Others simply said they had no comment. One nurse, when asked about her facility's coronavirus mitigation plans, said, "We don't have any."

"They are holding this information with clenched fists," said Brian Lee, executive director of Families for Better Care, a national long-term care watchdog group. "It is the worst-case scenario for residents in these facilities — this virus coupled with the poor [facility] track records.