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Iowa's Senior Health Care Workers Need Our Support

By Brent Willett, President and CEO, Iowa Health Care Association

COVID-19 is a brutal villain, infecting millions and taking more than 185,000 lives of some of our most vulnerable worldwide, just over 100 of which were Iowans as of the time of this writing. In the face of this, Iowans are showing the strength of their character as we confront a historic threat together. As the pandemic stretches on, individual acts of courage have become everyday occurrences. Nowhere is this truer than in our state's long-term care centers.

The threat facing those in long-term care is grave and unprecedented. Because many people who are infected remain asymptomatic, efforts to prevent the virus from being introduced into facilities has proven difficult. Once the virus is introduced into an environment with a highly vulnerable population like a nursing home, it is hard to impede its spread — and virtually impossible without enhanced testing capabilities and much more personal protective equipment (PPE) than we have access to today. This is true in many hospitals, and it is true in long-term care facilities.

Due to the frightening relentlessness of COVID-19, long-term care providers have taken unprecedented steps to protect their residents. Perhaps the most visible action taken has been the prohibition of non-essential visitors, a step taken by facilities across the country in early March. Unfortunately, even with these significant measures in place and facilities following guidance from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Centers for Disease Control and other public health officials, more than 3,600 long term care facilities nationwide have been impacted by the virus. This includes 13 in Iowa that have reported outbreaks to the Iowa Department of Public Health.

Yet, in the face of this challenge, the health care workers who care for acutely at-risk residents living in these facilities are rising to the occasion and performing with a valor we have not seen during peacetime in a generation; maybe two.

Many of us will never know the pain and uncertainty of leaving our families every morning or every night and going to work to provide a vulnerable population with life-sustaining care amid a pandemic. While many of us are hunkered down in our homes teleworking and spending time with our families, these caregivers are leaving their families to provide care for the loved ones of others— in-person and with compassion. In this extraordinary moment, what these caregivers are doing and what they are sacrificing is remarkable. We owe them our gratitude, but more importantly, we owe them our collective best efforts to address their critical needs.

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Adequate PPE and routine testing for long-term care are paramount in this moment. While there has been significant attention paid across the country to the importance of providing hospitals with the PPE they need to protect themselves from the virus, it is imperative we not overlook those working in long-term care settings for the same equipment.

More than 70% of long-term care facilities nationwide report they lack enough PPE. This not only puts the brave women and men providing care at risk, it also puts the people they care for at greater risk. As more caregivers and long-term care residents face the prospect of infection in part because of the nationwide shortage of PPE, it will place more of a burden on hospitals who care for the sick. Preventing the introduction of the virus and containing its spread in nursing homes and assisted living facilities is one of the most important and essential things we must do to relieve pressure on hospitals now, and when the virus likely returns in the fall.

Testing is a critical area where long-term care providers need more support. There are protocols in place to limit the spread of the virus once it is in a facility, which includes the establishment of isolation wings where those who have the virus are kept apart from the rest of the residents and are cared for by staff who do not interact with those in the rest of the building. But the virus leaves many of those infected without symptoms, these steps cannot be effectively implemented without broader surveillance testing across the sector.

We applaud Governor Reynolds' recent action to broaden testing for staff of some of Iowa's long-term care facilities, who represent the front lines of the COVID-19 crisis in Iowa. As enhanced testing for long-term care staff ramps up, equally important is the plan to address potential staff shortages which may result from expanded testing. Our association will work with the governor's office as it develops these plans to ensure continued access to care across Iowa's long-term care system. Moving forward, since a test result only captures an individual's infection status for a fixed period of time, long-term care facility staff and residents must be prioritized at the highest level to receive comprehensive, consistent and ongoing surveillance testing to effectively identify infections and respond as early as possible.

The women and men on the front lines of this fight who are caring for members of the greatest generation and others amongst our most vulnerable need the tools to confront, contain and ultimately defeat the virus. There is reason to be hopeful. Even though residents of long-term care are particularly at risk due to age and underlying health conditions, most recover from the virus. Caregivers can do even more amazing work if we collectively get them the basic tools they need: protective equipment, testing and staffing.

It is time to rally around the remarkable people who are the staff and residents in long-term care, like so many have rallied around equally courageous hospital staff and patients. Only by making the most vulnerable in our society a priority will we give them the support they have earned and deserve.

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