

April 27, 2020

Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor of New York  
Executive Chamber  
State Capitol  
Albany, New York 12224

***Re: A Statewide Coordinated Systematic Approach to Addressing COVID-19 in New York's Long Term Care System***

Dear Governor Cuomo:

Our organizations commend you for your leadership during these unprecedented times in addressing the needs of New Yorkers. We applaud the important actions you have taken to make our state an example for the nation on how to battle the deadly coronavirus pandemic. Your leadership is now needed to establish a statewide coordinated systematic approach to addressing COVID-19 in New York's long term care system.

While the severe health impacts of COVID-19 can occur across all ages, the data clearly show that the novel coronavirus is having a major detrimental impact on the long term care system in New York State. Given the congregate nature of older adults with underlying medical conditions residing in nursing homes and other adult care facilities as well those receiving care at home, these New Yorkers are among those at the highest risk of death from COVID-19.

As reported by the New York State Department of Health, over 3,000 New Yorkers have already died in long term care facilities – especially facilities with disproportionately high numbers of residents of color - and it is likely more will succumb to this disease.

Our organizations, which represent consumers, workers and New Yorkers of color utilizing and working in long term care facilities and agencies delivering care at home, call on you for your leadership to ensure our long term care system, which provides services in facilities, senior communities and at home, is coordinated and has the necessary tools to battle this pandemic.

Your leadership in preparing the hospital system set an example for the nation to follow. The long term care system now needs the same support and direction from you and your administration that you provided the hospital system, especially in New York City and Long Island, to battle this virus.

Your administration has already developed the blueprint for preparing and coordinating a large health care system in an emergency. We respectfully request that you modify that blueprint for the State's long-term care system.

Our organizations recommend the establishment of a LTC COVID-19 Task Force in your office to work with consumers, long term care providers, home care agencies, and unions on a coordinated, statewide basis to share information and seek solutions for the needs of the long term care system, addressing supply issues, staffing needs, shortages, and resident safety needs

for those being admitted into facilities, public reporting of facilities with COVID cases among residents and staff, and requiring communication protocols for families that include the right to virtual visitation of loved ones in facilities.

This task force as noted could be modeled on the systematic and successful approach you took on March 30, 2020 to establish a coordinated approach with New York's public and private hospital systems.

In addition to creating and overseeing a Governor's LTC COVID-19 Task Force, your immediate attention is needed to ensure the long term care system receives adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing. As you know, PPE is essential to efforts to reduce the spread of the virus. PPE reduces the amount of exposure between staff and patients in a facility, residents in a community, and in a home care setting where physical distancing is mostly impossible. Undoubtedly, the lack of PPE for long term care workers threatens to leave our most vulnerable population – and the workers themselves - facing serious health threats from exposure to infection. In addition, lack of PPE deters home care workers from safely serving patients at a time when the need for home care is rising and existing staffing shortages are exacerbated by COVID-19 infections within the long term care workforce.

Testing is the only way to determine if someone is COVID-positive. We recommend that as New York State begins to greatly enhance its testing, both the staff and residents of our long term care system be made an immediate priority. This testing will help control the spread of the virus among the resident population and the community at large, as staff, emergency health care providers, on-site maintenance contractors and others come and go from the facilities. It is also integral to eventual re-integration of family members and visitors to senior living communities. If supply shortages prevent widespread testing, the state should prioritize testing of individuals working or residing in long term care facilities who are known to have had contact with COVID-19-positive people, and for staff that have direct contact with residents, regardless of whether they are experiencing symptoms.

We thank you for your leadership and all the help you have provided. We stand committed to working with you and your administration to combat this deadly disease and help New Yorkers in need.

Sincerely,

Yvonne Armstrong  
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President, Downstate Long  
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cc: Melissa DeRosa, Secretary to the Governor  
Paul Francis, Deputy Secretary for Health and Human Services  
Howard Zucker, Commissioner, Department of Health