

## Long-term care facilities battle COVID-19 AND public perception

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A [recent report by AARP](#) found that fewer than 1% of Americans live in long-term care facilities, but 40% of COVID-19 deaths have occurred there. The report details a multitude of reasons why this has happened, especially in the early days of the pandemic. There has been another surge in [nursing home deaths](#) around the country following the Thanksgiving holiday, although Illinois and Michigan are faring better than other states.

Michelle Pollard has seen the stories about the number of people in long-term care facilities who have died due to COVID-19 and they make her sad.

As the care center administrator for Lutheran Hillside Village (LHV) in Peoria, Illinois, part of Lutheran Senior Services, Pollard oversees the long term care and rehabilitation areas of the community, which have a capacity of 107 beds. She knows how hard the staff at LHV works to protect and care for the residents, a group that is highly vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus.

“I don’t feel people understand the hard work that goes on in running a skilled nursing center, the dedication of the staff. Unfortunately, we’re dealing with a tricky virus. We’re doing the best we can to keep a very vulnerable population alive.”

Pollard and the LHV team have worked hard to make sure it stays that way and have had minimal deaths due to COVID-19. Among the things they are doing is strictly limiting visits and contact with outside visitors, which has been hard on families *and* residents, many of whom don’t understand why these measures are necessary. Additional virtual visits and town hall meetings between loved ones help bridge the gap, as well as outdoor, safely distanced visits when the weather allows.

“Staff has been marvelous. They have become the surrogate family – activities of daily living, bathing, grooming, dressing, what our CNAs or nurses do – but they’ve become the hairdresser, the daughter, they’re reading stories, holding their hands, maybe watching Wheel of Fortune, those extra things. They are dedicated to these individuals and want nothing more than to keep them safe and keep themselves safe. Without them, we wouldn’t have been successful to this point in what we’re doing,” explained Pollard.

Pollard is excited that LHV residents are able to now get the COVID-19 vaccine. They administered the first doses just after the start of the New Year. There is weekly universal testing for residents and staff. All staff goes through a check station when they come to work, having their temperature taken and answering a series of questions about how they’re feeling. Once cleared, they enter the building with a face mask and face shield which must remain on at all times, no matter where they work, except when eating in the break room. Pollard says the staff wears the extra protection with pride, which is why she struggles when she sees people in the general public going mask-less in public places.

“It’s heartbreaking to me. I would love to say to them ‘maybe you should spend a day in my shoes or in my staff’s shoes. Or go to a hospital or visit an ICU and see the outcome of not washing your hands, wearing your mask, socially distancing.’ It’s disheartening, and it’s very sad that people totally disregarding what’s needed to get this virus under control.”

Pollard appreciates the support LHV has received from partners like OSF HealthCare over the course of the pandemic. Matt Nieukirk, Director of Skilled Nursing Facilities for OSF, says the long-term care facilities they work with – nearly 50 across the OSF Ministry – have often been in a thankless position. He applauds their efforts to provide the best care possible during these trying times.

“There’s probably more people who’ve had it and recovered from it versus who had it and died from it. Don’t get me wrong, there have been outbreaks and some serious cases where residents have died, but for the most part the facilities have done an excellent job of keeping COVID out and keeping their residents safe. These facilities are surviving. I guarantee you ten years from now we’ll look back – two years from now, maybe 6 months from now – we’ll look back and think it was just another crisis that we were able to get through.”

For Michelle Pollard, that day can’t come soon enough.

Learn more about the [skilled nursing care](#) offered in collaboration with OSF HealthCare.