

Nation&World

THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

Sleuthing at funeral parlors reveals toll at nursing homes



Preston Griffin, outside the Alfonso Cannon Funeral Chapels in North Philadelphia, hardly ever stops working. He waits for a call from a funeral home for the next pickup of someone who died, as in this nursing home case. David Maialetti, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, TNS

Elise Young and Keshia Clukey *Bloomberg News*

Connecticut is swabbing corpses at funeral homes. Maryland is testing all nursing-home residents and staff, symptomatic or not. Coast to coast, governors have intensified efforts to get accurate death counts at the facilities as investigations suggest far more devastation than initially recorded.

In New York and New Jersey, tallies of deaths from the novel coronavirus surged after the states began disclosing more data on nursing-home residents.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo added a requirement that all positive test results for staff must be reported to the state health department by the next day.

Nursing homes account for at least a third of the nation's COVID-19 fatalities, and in 14 states they're more than half the total, according to Kaiser Family Foundation data. Those numbers, though, are woefully incomplete because 18 states aren't disclosing such data and those that are provide varying levels of information. As officials struggle to measure and understand the true toll, the virus continues to victimize the frail and elderly in even the best-run facilities, said Elizabeth Dugan, associate professor of gerontology at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

"They're almost like sitting ducks," said Dugan, whose research team warned of imminent widespread nursing-home infections in early March.

Around the same time, one of the first major U.S. outbreaks of COVID-19 took place at the Life Care Center in Kirkland, Washington. Since then, the number of deaths linked to that facility has more than tripled, to 45 as of May 7.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services on April 19 started requiring long-term

care facilities to report COVID-19 cases. And the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said it will penalize nursing facilities that don't submit weekly infection updates.

Some states have been forced to do their own detective work. Connecticut's chief medical examiner, Dr. James Gill, sent investigators on the trail of vague death certificates, going so far as to swab the deceased as their bodies awaited cremation. Of 65 dead nursing-home residents his staff tested at funeral homes, 54 were newly found to be positive, he said.

"Acute respiratory failure' isn't a cause of death — it means the person's dead, and you have to answer why they had acute respiratory failure," Gill said.

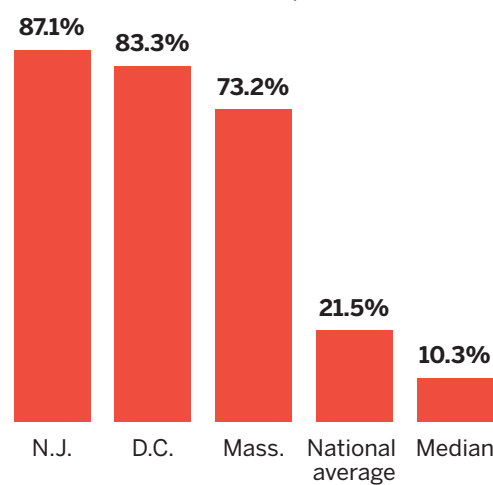
New York and New Jersey are conducting broad inquiries amid reports of improperly stored bodies, scarce personal protective equipment and poor communication with families and officials.

About 70% of the nation's more than 15,000 nursing homes are run by companies, including Life Care Centers of America Inc. and HCR Manorcare, which each operate more than 200; and publicly traded Genesis HealthCare, which has more than 300, and whose founder died in April after a long-term illness and COVID-19 complications.

All of the homes are regulated by federal and state laws, while care is funded by a mix of Medicaid, Medicare, private insurance and individuals. Though President Donald Trump's administration had worked to ease government regulation of the nursing-home industry, it said after the first virus outbreaks in U.S. facilities that its inspections oversight would emphasize infection control.

COVID-19 in nursing homes

New Jersey has the highest rate of infection in its nursing homes with at least one case of the novel coronavirus reported.



Source: *Washington Post*, KFF, Politico
Emmett Mayer III, *Advance Local*

BEIJING

Fresh details emerge on China's virus response

Bloomberg News

China said it didn't know until Jan. 19 how infectious the new coronavirus is, pushing back against accusations that it intentionally withheld information about the severity of the outbreak in Wuhan from the world.

While Chinese officials knew that there were signs of human-to-human transmission earlier, it was hard to ascertain the new virus's level of contagiousness, said Zeng Yixin, vice minister of the National Health Commission, at a press briefing in Beijing on Friday. There are diseases like HIV that while infectious, are not easily transmitted from person to person, he said.

It was only on Jan. 19 that Chinese scientists concluded that the virus spreads easily among people, and China released that information to the world the next day, said Zeng.

The accounting of events from top officials came as China faces growing blame for a delay in sounding the alarm about the coronavirus, which allowed people to spread it unwittingly for some time. Zeng was responding to an Associated Press report in April that cited confidential documents showing Chinese officials were internally discussing the possibility of widespread infections six days before President Xi Jinping warned the public of the dangers of the virus.

The alleged delay resulted in millions of people traveling from Wuhan to elsewhere in the country and the world, seeding a pandemic that has now sickened more than 4.4 million people and killed over 300,000.

Giving a rundown of events since the crisis began, Zeng said that China concluded on Jan. 9 that it was dealing with a novel coronavirus and began developing test kits the next day. On Jan. 12, it informed the World Health Organization about the outbreak.

On Jan. 14, a national meeting of provincial health officials was held.

"Many uncertainties remained. We understood there's more research needed on human-to-human transmission, and we couldn't rule out the chance of a further spread of the virus," Zeng said.

Besides its alleged delay in disclosing information on the virus outbreak at an earlier stage, China has also faced skepticism about its official tallies of deaths and infections.

The pandemic has revived tensions between the world's two largest economies. China and the U.S. are escalating disputes from visas to supply chains as the two countries continue blaming each other regarding the origins of the virus, a mystery that global experts are trying to unravel.

Earlier this month, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo accused China of covering up the virus by silencing doctors who tried to warn about the disease and ordering that samples be destroyed on Jan. 3. Liu Dengfeng, another NHC official, said that China did issue a document on Jan. 3 about lab safety and that the country's regulations have clear requirements for how to handle samples, including their destruction.

"The comments made by these U.S. officials are taken out of context and intended to confuse the public," Liu said, adding that China has shared samples with countries including the U.S., U.K. and Australia in recent years.

ELECTION 2020

'Trump haters' will host their own Republican convention

David Weigel *Bloomberg*

Conservative critics of President Donald Trump will hold a convention of their own during the Republican National Convention, with plans to craft their own statement of principles and offer it to a post-Trump electorate.

"The Trump administration has failed, and that's provided us with an opportunity to offer an alternative vision," said Evan McMullin, who ran against Trump as an independent in 2016 and has been part of multiple anti-Trump efforts since then. "We'll be ready in the wake of what we see as a coming Trump defeat."

The Convention on Founding Principles is scheduled to run from Aug. 24-27 in Charlotte, North Carolina, the city hosting this year's RNC. The Republicans for a New President campaign, the chief organizer of the event, is planning an online component and a backup plan for a virtual convention if the RNC is canceled. Asked about the plans on Friday morning, the president's campaign brushed them off.

"These Trump haters are sad, pathetic and irrelevant," Trump campaign spokesman Tim Murtaugh said. "President Trump has united Republicans and has unprecedented support within the party. He's also attracting non-Republicans and making huge inroads with blacks and Latinos. He will be reelected in November."

McMullin, who won 0.5% of the vote for his last-minute 2016 campaign against Trump, launched Stand Up Republic when that election was over. Republicans for a New President is that group's latest project, the most ambitious effort by anti-Trump conservatives who have run ads against Trump and held smaller conferences on what to do about the president.

The Convention on Founding Principles grew out of an event Trump critics held at the National Press Club this year, concurrent with the Conservative Political Action Conference. Organizers were pleasantly sur-

prised when more than 300 people attended their counter-conference, prompting a move to a larger room.

The August event, said McMullin, would more closely resemble an actual political convention. There will be debates and voting on a statement of the attendees' principles, and a vote on whether they supported a particular candidate for president — presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden, or a "well-known third-party candidate." (Michigan Rep. Justin Amash, who is seeking the Libertarian Party's nomination for president, has been praised by many anti-Trump conservatives.)

"The convention will be centered around founding principles as its name indicates," McMullin said. "Candidates, as well as current and former officeholders who honor those principles will be invited to speak — though that may or may not include presidential candidates."



President Donald Trump delivers remarks about coronavirus vaccine development in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington. Drew Angerer, Getty Images