Garbage bags as PPE. Infected staff on duty. Residents found unresponsive. Wisconsin nursing homes during the pandemic.

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Inside Wisconsin nursing homes during the pandemic, residents were dying at a rate that would have overwhelmed any hospital system in the state. Staff members were sick and dying, too. Nursing homes did hold unprecedented power in the state, a Wisconsin facilities clinical conservatorship protocol, including by asking COVID-positive staff to keep working, not screening visitors for symptoms and not isolating infected residents.

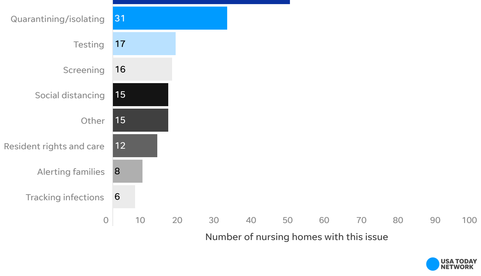
Even when inspectors were present, employees at several facilities didn't always follow state rules. Some nursing homes didn't have enough personal protective equipment, or even enough supply. At least five nursing homes didn't call inspectors to their families about coronavirus cases for days or weeks.

In addition to the state's conservatorship, Wisconsin nursing homes and assisted facilities reports from March to January cases, although, officials cited gaps of Wisconsin's reporting system, including from coronavirus-related fatalities, with some of them incorrectly reported as non-COVID.

Two thirds of the violations received in August or later, months into the pandemic, were for failure to keep residents safe and better access to masks and testing, some nursing homes still failed to take basic measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

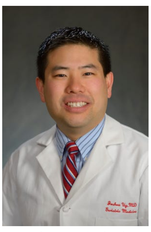
The most common failure was incorrect use of masks, gowns and other personal protective equipment (PPE), with 1,000 violations, according to a review of state and federal data. Other common violations included failure to provide for residents a safe, dignified indoor social distancing or contemplate COVID-19 positive and negative residents.

To gauge the scope of the problem outside Wisconsin, the Journal Sentinel analyzed federal inspection reports from Illinois, Ohio, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Iowa,



'All the things you should do'

Long-term care representatives have long argued that Medicaid's reimbursement rates are low, leading nursing homes to short-staff and overcrowd their facilities, even before the pandemic. Federal regulators, they say, should help struggling nursing homes with strike teams and extra training, instead of fining and punishing them.



Dr. Joshua Uy, Geriatric Fellowship Program Director at the University of Pennsylvania
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University of Pennsylvania geriatrician Dr. Joshua Uy, who helped lead a state task force supporting more than 300 nursing homes across Pennsylvania during the pandemic, said the federal government holds nursing homes to a higher standard than most hospitals.

For example, he said, hospital staff are allowed to move between positive and negative rooms and can wear surgical instead of N95 masks in coronavirus units.

"You're asking nursing homes to do hospital-level monitoring with nursing home-level resources," Uy said.

But many resident advocates said they do not trust that nursing home corporations are investing in staffing and care.

"The nursing homes, particularly the for-profit ones, are not going to put their money where their mouth is," said Patricia McGinnis, director of the nonprofit California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform.

Patricia McGinnis, executive director of California Advocates for Nursing Home Reform
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Some advocates pointed to success stories as evidence that rampant coronavirus spread is not inevitable.

Researchers from the University of North Carolina studied a chain of small alternative nursing homes called Green House homes. These facilities house a maximum of 12 residents who each get their own bedroom and bathroom.

Each Green House home also gets its own dedicated team of nursing assistants who not only handle medical care but also take care of laundry, cleaning and cooking — reducing the number of staff that have to circulate through each home.

Using data from January to July 2020 for the hardest-hit homes, UNC researchers found that Green House homes had half the coronavirus infection rate of small traditional nursing homes. Large traditional nursing homes, with more than 50 people, had infection rates nine times that of Green House homes. In addition, researchers found COVID-19 mortality rates in traditional nursing homes were two to four times that in Green House homes.

"Smaller is better," said Susan Ryan, senior director of the Green House Project. "We learned that pretty clearly during the pandemic."

Advocates also pointed to places like Maryland Baptist Aged Home, a Black-owned facility in West Baltimore that serves predominantly low-income Black and Latino residents, who have been disproportionately affected by the virus. The nursing home has reported no coronavirus cases among residents or staff throughout the pandemic — a feat that administrators attribute to locking down early and performing temperature and oxygen checks three times per day.

On the other side of the country, one of the largest skilled nursing facilities in the nation, Laguna Honda nursing home in San Francisco, reported no COVID-19 deaths until December, 10 months into the pandemic. The nursing home has 715 residents and more than 1,700 staff members.

"They paid hazard pay. They tested people. They had adequate PPE," said McGinnis. "They did all the things you should do when there's an outbreak like this."

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel data reporter Andrew Mollica contributed to this story. Olivia Cohen is a freelance correspondent in Chicago.

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How the story was reported

Journal Sentinel reporters downloaded every inspection report filed on the Wisconsin Department of Health Services website from March 2020 to January 2021 for each of Wisconsin's 360 skilled nursing facilities. Reporters then wrote a computer program to filter for nursing homes that were likely violating COVID-19 protocols specifically.

Journal Sentinel reporters then read each inspection report to confirm the violations were related to COVID-19 and broke out the general violation types into more specific categories. Some citations involved two or more separate issues, such as PPE and hand hygiene.

Reporters did a similar analysis of nursing homes in Cook County in Illinois from March to December 2020.

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