



ISSUES BRIEF: Nursing Homes - COVID-19 PANDEMIC ISSUES

- Issue:** The pandemic took a devastating toll on nursing home residents nationally, and in particular in Massachusetts. As of February 2022, over 6,100¹ nursing home resident deaths accounted for nearly 33% of the state's COVID-19 deaths², even though nursing home residents comprise less than 1/2% of the population³. Sadly, countless other nursing home residents suffered from isolation and neglect from a year-long ban on visitations.
- Goal:** We must implement care improvements and procedures so that nursing home residents and staff are never subjected to such suffering again.
- Problem Statement:** All and more contributed to the rapid spread of COVID-19 in nursing homes: long-standing problems, such as poor infection control and insufficient staffing; complications from inadequate PPE supplies; congregate living style facilitating the devastating spread of such a contagious disease; struggles with implementing vaccinations and boosters.
- Background:** On March 10, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency was declared in the Commonwealth. Then on March 13th, due to the highly contagious nature of COVID-19, federal and state governments locked down nursing homes prohibiting visitations for an entire year, exacerbating longstanding staff shortages since families often provide informal care and support to residents. Compounding this problem was the absence of long-term care ombudsmen and state regulators, meaning that there was little to no scrutiny of care in nursing homes in the first year of the pandemic. Protections, systems, and planning all are necessary to prevent a repeat of the devastation COVID-19 brought to elders, those with disabilities, and their caregivers.
- Recommendations:**
(Insufficient staffing issues in separate Issues Brief.)
1. **Require full-time infection preventionist for each nursing home and mandate annual infection prevention trainings for all working and volunteering in nursing homes.**
 2. **Maintain visitations at all times**, including during infectious disease outbreaks, while implementing appropriate safeguard protocols.
 3. **Require ongoing monitoring and reporting of long-COVID symptoms and ailments.** Some COVID-19 survivors experience long-term symptoms which can be debilitating and can be easily misdiagnosed.
 4. **Require “outbreak response” plan by each facility** to be reviewed and tested annually and submitted to appropriate authorities.
 5. **Require transparency, analysis, and timely reporting** of pandemic deaths, infection rates, vaccinations, and booster rates for nursing home residents and staff to better understand the disease.

For more information, please contact Facilities Workgroup Chair: Arlene Germain, agermain@manhr.org.

Endnotes

¹ 6,163/18,988 = 32.5% MA nursing home resident COVID-19 deaths represent 32.5% of total MA COVID-19 deaths.

6,163 resident deaths as of 2/28/22: [Chapter 93 Elder Facility Aggregative Report Monthly Update \(data from March 10, 2020 to February 28, 2022\)](#).

² As of 3/29/22, 18,988 Total MA COVID-19 deaths --- “Deaths Reported” tab in this file: [COVID-19 Raw Data - March 29, 2022](#).

PLEASE NOTE: As of 3/22/22, the total MA death statistics were decreased by about 4,000 deaths.

For comparison, the following was correct as of 12/31/21:

28.9% ratio of MA nursing home resident COVID-19 deaths compared to total MA COVID-19 deaths:

5,735 - 12/31/21 MA Resident Deaths: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/archive-of-chapter-93-covid-19-data#december-2021->, then select: [Chapter 93 Elder Facility Aggregative Report Monthly Update \(data from March 10, 2020 to December 31, 2021\)](#), select sheet entitled Resident Deaths.

19,821 - 12/31/21 Total MA COVID-19 deaths: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/archive-of-covid-19-cases-in-massachusetts#december-2021->, then select [COVID-19 Raw Data - December 31, 2021](#).

The above 3/22/22 MA death statistics adjustment is the second adjustment to death statistics since the pandemic started. “On April 14, [2021] Massachusetts had one of the highest reported nursing home COVID-19 death rates in the country, with 9,018 dead. The next day, it plummeted 39 percent [3,516] to 5,502, according to the official state count...”

Is Massachusetts undercounting COVID-19 deaths in nursing homes?

A change in methodology — to align the state with national standards — pegs the death rate at 1 in 7 residents instead of 1 in 4

By [Kay Lazar](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 23, 2021, 11:15 a.m. *Rob Weisman of the Globe staff contributed to this report.*

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/04/23/nation/is-massachusetts-undercounting-covid-deaths-nursing-homes/>

³ 30,647/6,984,723=0.48%

30,647 # Residents under I4800 Dementia, per Q4 '21 MDS data: <https://www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Computer-Data-and-Systems/Minimum-Data-Set-3-0-Public-Reports/Minimum-Data-Set-3-0-Frequency-Report>

6,984,723 7/1/21 MA residents <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/MA>

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