

More than 1 million Americans have died of COVID-19. Why is there no national day to remember them?

By [Claire Thornton](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 1, 2025, 1:56 p.m.



With the Washington Monument in the background, people looked at white flags that were part of artist Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg's temporary art installation, "In America: Remember," in remembrance of Americans who have died of COVID-19, on the National Mall in Washington, Sept. 17, 2021. The installation consisted of more than 630,000 flags. BRYNN ANDERSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Five years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country is still grappling with how to memorialize the more than 1.2 million who have died from the virus in the United States. Events this March marking the grim anniversary will come and go as

they have for the past four years, with no national day of remembrance for the dead.

Some advocacy groups and politicians have pushed for an official day to memorialize victims. But discussions about how to commemorate a pandemic that [shattered lives and divided the nation remain](#) fraught. Five years after the virus emerged, [Americans have not coalesced](#) around an understanding of how COVID shaped us and what we've lost.

“The kind of simple narrative that would compel the country to come together and commemorate these losses is not happening right now, and I don't know if it ever will,” said Tim Recuber, a sociology professor at Smith College.

Massachusetts Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey have [introduced a congressional resolution](#) to declare the first Monday in March as “COVID-19 Victims Memorial Day,” but it has never gone to a vote on the floor.

Warren will introduce it again in the coming weeks, according to a spokesperson for the senator. But given deep political divisions in Congress and the country, a different reception seems unlikely.

The resolution states that in March 2020, “communities in the United States began to experience increased death due to the COVID–19 pandemic, and families lost parents, siblings, children, friends, and neighbors to the virus.”

“Five years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, our communities' recovery isn't complete without recognizing the pain and loss experienced in the process,” Warren said in an email on Thursday. “This resolution will give long-overdue recognition and honor to the family, friends, and neighbors we lost to the pandemic.”

As the nation marks another year since the pandemic, some wonder if there will come a time when the country can agree on an official day to remember those who died.

National group fights for COVID remembrance day

After Kristin Urquiza of San Francisco lost her 65-year-old father to COVID-19 on June 30, 2020, she launched a group called Marked by COVID to advocate for pandemic remembrance.

The nonprofit created the [National COVID Memorial](#), which collects names, photos, and other information about COVID-19 victims. The memorial has traveled to seven states, including Massachusetts and Connecticut, and Washington, D.C., since 2022.



Nurse practitioner Dianne Valko used a nasal swab to collect a specimen from Linda Blundell at the NEW Health walk-up COVID-19 testing site in Boston on June 30, 2020. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Urquiza met with members of the [Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions](#) to lobby for Warren's resolution to make the first day of March COVID-19 Victims Memorial Day. The resolution [failed to get bipartisan support](#).

“It doesn’t feel right that we’re not taking time to reflect on what happened,” said Urquiza, who has helped organize more than 1,000 COVID-19 vigils since 2020.

Still, some mourning families say they feel an unspoken “mandate to move on” because the pandemic is over, even as the virus continues to circulate.

“That makes them really uncomfortable,” Urquiza said, noting that people are still dying from COVID-19 [each week](#).

More than 10 states have passed COVID memorial day resolutions that applied to a single year, including Massachusetts, which proclaimed March 6, 2023, “COVID-19 Victims and Survivors Memorial Day.”

In 2021, Massachusetts atate Representatives Natalie Blais and Mindy Domb introduced a House resolution to create an annual COVID remembrance day, but it never got a vote. A spokesperson for Domb’s office said this session she is focusing on bills addressing long COVID research; Blais’s office did not respond to a request for comment.

Massachusetts Senator Ed Markey, who introduced the [congressional resolution](#) for a COVID victims memorial day with Warren, is the ranking member on the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

Other New England senators on that committee, including Susan Collins of Maine, Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, and Bernie Sanders of Vermont, did not respond to a request for comment about the resolution.

Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy, a doctor who was the committee’s ranking member when the resolution was introduced, also did not respond to requests for comment.



Doctor Patrick Hyland rode a Green Line train home from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center where he worked in the internal medicine department in Boston on April 3, 2020. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

A nation still scarred from lockdowns, politically polarized

As the years go by, so much discomfort continues to surround the COVID pandemic, said Nina Tumarkin, a history and Slavic studies professor at Wellesley College.

“We’re bad at memorializing; we’re bad at death to begin with,” said Tumarkin, who teaches the seminar “WWII as Memory and Myth.”

The trauma of facing a novel virus and the loneliness of lockdowns exhausted people, said author Craig Nelson, who has published books on national disasters including Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, which prompted the US to enter World War II.

And, because people are still dying of COVID-19, we cannot celebrate any sort of “victory” yet, he said, if we ever can.

“People are still traumatized by COVID,” Nelson said. “They’re still in the war.”

As months turned into years, [political polarization caused clashes over masks, vaccines](#), and even ideas about who or what the real “villain” of the pandemic was, Recuber said. Some saw lockdowns as effective and necessary to stop the spread of the virus, while others protested them, saying they hurt schools and businesses, he said.

“It doesn’t seem like a larger narrative around COVID and why it was bad has really coalesced,” Recuber said.

It can be challenging to commemorate complex events

In the United Kingdom, the [National COVID-19 Day of Reflection](#) falls on March 9. Canada has a [National Day of Observance](#) to commemorate COVID-19 deaths on March 11.

Not so in the US, where the pandemic and other historical moments can be complicated.

In the US, Veterans Day is on Nov. 11, marking the day in 1918 when the armistice ending World War I was signed.

But while European countries have large celebrations marking the end of World War II, the US has never done the same, Tumarkin points out. The US brought an end to the war in the Pacific realm by dropping atomic bombs on Japan, killing more than 200,000 people.

“We can’t celebrate WWII because of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” Tumarkin said, naming the cities where the bombs were dropped.



Physician assistant Meagan Murtagh worked in the nurses station at a Quality Inn that was converted into a non-congregate shelter in Revere for those who tested positive for COVID-19 on May 8, 2020. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Elected officials fumbled COVID response

The resolution creating COVID-19 Victims Memorial Day may never make it out of Congress because politicians of both major parties failed to adequately respond to COVID-19 and likely don't want to return to that topic now, Recuber said.

"Obviously Trump did a bad job and it probably cost him reelection in 2020," Recuber said, while adding that he believes President Biden was also wrong to end national emergency responses to the pandemic in April 2021.

Urquiza, of the group Marked by COVID, said families she's talked to across the US just want a day on the calendar commemorating their loved ones' pandemic deaths. But, she said, "elected officials allowed COVID to become politicized, and as a result, it's not a winning issue."

“As somebody who lost my dad, that’s not a reasonable answer,” she said. “But it is the answer.”

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