

WSJ News Exclusive | As U.S. Nursing-Home Deaths Reach 50,000, States Ease Lockdowns

Jon Kamp and Anna Wilde Mathews

8-10 minutes

Nursing homes and other senior-care facilities have started to allow more visits after a monthslong lockdown to protect vulnerable residents from [coronavirus infections](#), even as the pandemic's death toll tied to such places surpasses 50,000.

A Wall Street Journal tally of state data compiling fatalities from Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, underscores the virus's heavy cost to those living in long-term-care facilities. Deaths among senior-care center staff and residents appear to represent at least 40% of the overall count of more than 116,000 U.S. fatalities related to Covid-19 as compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

The pace of reopening elder-care facilities is uneven around the U.S., with a patchwork of rules that is frustrating some of their operators.

States are trying to strike a delicate balance. Allowing more visitors heightens potential exposure to a virus that is particularly

dangerous to frail seniors living in close quarters, and some facilities say protective gear can still be hard to find.

On the other side, bans on family visits also carry health risks for residents, including the potential for cognitive decline, experts say. Many family members have grown frustrated with months of limited contact through electronic devices and closed windows, with exceptions mainly in end-of-life situations.

“The psychological effects of isolation and not being with family and loved ones are significant,” said Joseph Ouslander, a geriatrician who is a professor at Florida Atlantic University. “On the other side of the scale, you have the nightmare of someone bringing the virus into a building, and many people get sick, and some die.”

State officials said they are moving carefully. “This guidance will allow us to continue to protect the health and lives of Oklahomans while allowing them to safely resume valuable interactions with their loved ones,” said Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt while announcing reopening guidelines for long-term-care facilities last Friday.

On June 8, Laureen Bidwell was able to sit outside with her mother Pauline Arbuckle at an assisted-living facility in Conneaut, Ohio, their first in-person visit in months, for 15 minutes. They were at least 6 feet apart, in masks, but “it brightened her day,” Ms. Bidwell said.

STAY INFORMED

Get a coronavirus briefing six days a week, and a weekly Health

newsletter once the crisis abates: [Sign up here](#).

Ms. Bidwell planned another in-person visit to the Villa at the Lake on Tuesday for her mother's 96th birthday, even though the enforced distance makes it difficult. "It was very bittersweet to see her, because I wanted to give her a hug so bad," she said.

Randall Residence, the company that owns the center, has reopened to visitors at its Ohio facilities, Director of Operations Scott Peters said. But the company hasn't done the same yet at facilities in Illinois and Michigan, reflecting the evolving mix of state guidance, he said.



Pauline Arbuckle during an outdoor visit with her daughter on June 8.

Photo: Deanna Fleischmann/Villa at the Lake

Ohio has started letting assisted-living centers set up outdoor

visits using masks, while encouraging separation between people. Massachusetts and Indiana are allowing outdoor visits at long-term care facilities including nursing homes, which are regulated differently and often house less-healthy residents.

Other states, including West Virginia, Kansas and Oklahoma, have issued their own guidelines for nursing homes and other facilities to reopen to visitors.

The Journal's tally of the latest state data shows more than 51,000 Covid-19-associated deaths tied to long-term-care facilities, including nursing homes and assisted-living sites, along with more than 250,000 cases. The counts likely understate the full impact of the outbreak—which has also hit senior facilities hard in other countries—because of reporting lags and incomplete information from some states.

The Sheboygan Senior Community, a nursing home and assisted-living facility in Sheboygan, Wis., began allowing outdoor visits by family members on June 10 after consulting with county health officials, while enforcing distancing requirements and mask-wearing. The next day, the facility learned a staffer had tested positive for Covid-19.

Paul Treffert, the chief executive, said after checking again with county officials and informing residents, staff and families about the test result, he plans to keep the outdoor visits, which he feels are safe. The staffer is quarantining for 14 days, he said, while residents in the unit where the person worked were retested and weren't infected.

“We’re working really hard to get some reconnection,” he said.

“Everyone’s adapting on the fly the best we can on these things.”

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services ordered nursing homes to shut out nearly all visitors on March 13, with exceptions including end of life. But when the agency issued recommendations on May 18 for how to allow visitors to return, it left final decisions to state and local officials. Assisted-living facilities are regulated by states.

[Genesis Healthcare](#) Inc., the biggest U.S. nursing-home company, said it is following CMS guidance and state rules to allow outdoor visits at many sites. But state rules vary significantly “for reasons that have little to do with differences in coronavirus prevalence or risk,” said Richard Feifer, the company’s chief medical officer. “As an organization, we must follow each state’s regulations, which can often be frustrating for families.”

Randy Bury, chief executive of the Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society, which operates 147 nursing homes and is part of Sioux Falls, S.D.-based Sanford Health, said the nonprofit is developing its own guidelines for reopening, but needs to reconcile them with rules in the 22 states where it operates, some not yet released.

States had leeway to take their own approaches, and “that created, in my mind, chaos on this issue,” said Mr. Bury. “We’re going to come out with 22 different plans...what standard are we going to be held to?”

In announcing the CMS reopening recommendations for nursing

homes, Administrator Seema Verma said the federal agency would let final decisions “rest with state and local leaders who are most familiar with the needs of their community.”

Meanwhile, recently released federal data from about 12,000 nursing homes that passed a CMS data-quality check found 673 of them still lacked some kind of protective equipment, such as masks or gowns, while 3,138 had less than a one-week supply of at least one type, for the week of May 31.

“Too many aging-services providers are still in desperate need of testing, personal protective equipment and emergency funding,” said Katie Smith Sloan, chief executive of LeadingAge, which represents nonprofit providers of aging services.

Despite the continued risks, some families believe the cost of separation is too high, and disagree with one-size-fits-all policies halting visits. Lynn Jones, who lives near New Orleans, has shuttled back and forth to see his mother at a Sulphur, La., nursing home through a window, but said he can’t share physical space with the 91-year-old, even though she has already recovered from Covid-19.

“I really think it’s taken a toll on her emotional and psychological health,” he said of the isolation. “I’ve likened it to solitary confinement.”

Write to Jon Kamp at jon.kamp@wsj.com and Anna Wilde Mathews at anna.mathews@wsj.com

Copyright ©2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved. 87990cbe856818d5eddac44c7b1cdeb8