

# **Don't blame nursing homes for the deaths of residents in a pandemic**

***To grade nursing homes on deaths is disrespectful to the caregivers who put their lives on the line to protect residents, who are like family to them.***  
**Dr. David Gifford**

The USA TODAY series "Dying for Care" does not help potential residents and their family members identify appropriate long-term care settings as intended.

The series focuses on a narrow time period of the pandemic during the U.S. COVID surge in the fall of 2020 – a time when cases were rampant throughout the general population, deaths were at their height, and widespread availability of vaccines and treatments did not yet exist. Perhaps most important in regard to nursing homes during this time, providers were pleading with public health officials for resources to help protect their residents and staff, such as testing, personal protective equipment and staffing support, but little aid was provided.

Much has changed since this timeframe, including the distribution of lifesaving vaccines and more readily available supplies, making long-term care facilities much safer. Nearly 90% of nursing home residents are now fully vaccinated, protecting hundreds of thousands from the latest omicron surge when infected residents were four times less likely to succumb from the virus.

Additionally, there is now clearer federal guidance on testing frequency, isolation protocols, responding to new variants, the use of masks and much more to help curb the spread of COVID-19 in long-term care.

---

## **Nursing homes were not the problem**

Independent academic researchers have consistently found that COVID outbreaks in nursing homes were primarily related to the spread of the virus in the surrounding community. These studies found that facility ownership, government ratings and previous citations, including for infection control, were not determining factors for COVID-19 outbreaks in nursing homes.

The truth is that COVID-19 viciously targets our nation's most vulnerable – the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions – precisely the individuals who reside in America's nursing homes.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that the risk of mortality for those 85 years and older is 340 times higher than those 18 to 29 years old. The average age of residents in long-term care is 85, and almost everyone has at least one – if not multiple – chronic, medical conditions. And due to this, we saw tragedy in long-term care settings around the globe.

Nursing home providers are committed to learning from this pandemic, but to suggest that our front-line heroes did not do enough to prevent these deaths fails to recognize the nature of this virus as well as how public health officials neglected to direct resources to where the most vulnerable people were living.

To then grade nursing homes on deaths during this window of time is disrespectful to the millions of caregivers who put their lives on the line to protect their residents, who are like family to them.

It's time we stop placing blame on nursing homes for a once-in-a-century global pandemic. If potential residents and their loved ones are searching for a nursing home, they need to use up-to-date information. Many great tools and resources already are at your disposal, including with the latest COVID-19 data. But the greatest tool of all is visiting a facility in-person to get to know the other residents, staff members, services and, now, COVID protocols.

And together, let's focus on meaningful solutions that can improve the care residents receive and encourage policymakers to prioritize long term care for the resources our nation's seniors deserve.

*Dr. David Gifford, a geriatrician, is the chief medical officer at the American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living.*