

**Katie Smith Sloan Remarks**  
**National Impact of COVID-19 Community Spread on Aging Services this Holiday Season**  
**November 23, 2020 Telepresser**

Older adults are living at ground zero of the worst pandemic in a century. Eighty percent of COVID deaths have been older adults, and this week we'll hit the tragic milestone of 100,000 deaths in long-term care.

Those of us who have worked in this field know that our society has long ignored and deprioritized older adults. But it is still shocking that as people are dying in droves, our leaders fail to act. How many of the most vulnerable Americans must die before we see meaningful relief?

For nine months, we've been shouting about the urgent need to protect the lives of older adults: how we desperately need more help around testing, PPE, staffing support and the money to pay for all of it. Our pleas are being ignored.

The support we have received has been insufficient and is running out quickly. Many of our nonprofit members have been covering the enormous and unexpected costs of COVID by seeking charitable contributions, digging deep into evaporating reserves, or they are simply running on fumes. Some providers have closed and others are at risk of not being able to continue operations.

Since the start of this pandemic, our members have fought day in and day out to innovate and adapt to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Staff and resources have been stretched as they continue to deliver the highest standard of care to residents while battling this relentless and deadly virus.

And now, COVID's deadliest moment has arrived. We are beginning what experts say will be the worst phase of the pandemic. The virus is raging, infection rates are skyrocketing, and the pool of financial support is running low.

Our leaders must wake up. Congress must deliver a new federal lifeline now.

Today, we're offering a look inside how aging services are using innovation, dedication and grit to keep people safe during the pandemic. But we cannot do it alone. Everyone of every age and in every part of our society has a role to play in getting older adults and care workers through these next months. We are counting on Congress and each and every American to do their part.

The pandemic continues to take a disproportionate toll on older adults--in terms of cases, deaths, and suffering from isolation and depression. As the holiday season begins this week, the pain wrought by the pandemic is put in stark relief as many families won't be able to come together.

The research is clear that community COVID-19 infection rates directly impact rates within congregate care settings like nursing homes. Our members are looking closely at positivity rates in their towns and counties to inform how they approach Thanksgiving procedures. You'll hear about some of the creative ways they're marking the holiday shortly.

But ultimately, whether families with loved ones in aging services can be together this holiday season will be driven more by what's happening in the surrounding areas than what's happening between the walls of their home. The sad truth is that surges of COVID around the country mean that many

providers--for the health and safety of their residents and staff--will be forced to curb or restrict family visits, in-house meals and celebrations.

This Thanksgiving could have been different. If community spread had been contained, older adults and the people who care for them wouldn't be far from those they love this holiday. The sadness and pain of so many families this Thanksgiving should be a call to action. Today I'm here along with my colleagues from around the country to make that call.

First up from Georgia is CEO of AG Rhodes and incoming LeadingAge board member Deke Cateau.

<Deke, Julie, John Remarks>

## PART TWO

Thanks to all three of you for your important perspective.

Before we open up for questions, I want to talk a little bit more about the impact of COVID on the upcoming holiday season. Deke shared some of the ways AG Rhodes is making it safe for residents and staff to celebrate -- and his organization is just one of more than 5,000 LeadingAge members whose staff and leadership are taking special care to honor traditions and maintain family connections this year.

The spread of COVID around the country means that most providers will ask residents to stay at home for Thanksgiving. A recent survey of our members found that 81% are encouraging residents not to travel at all, and nearly half are discouraging residents from inviting guests onto the property, except in special compassionate care circumstances. But let's be clear - they are not simply shutting the doors and calling it a day.

Aging services aren't just about care and services -- they're about home, lifting spirits, and helping older adults live life to the fullest. Whether it's an aide visiting a private residence or independent living communities where older adults move in and stay many years, or a nursing home delivering intimate, daily care in a resident's own rooms... we are a part of people's homes and their lives. The pandemic has made it ever more clear how much like family care workers and providers are to so many older Americans.

Our members, who are all nonprofit, mission-driven organizations, are working hard to make the holidays meaningful and fun for older adults -- despite the challenges that COVID has brought into the places where they live.

This Thanksgiving, our members are doing all they can to help those in their care celebrate the holiday, including continuing virtual and, where possible, distanced outdoor visits. Some providers have even hired "virtual visitor guides" to connect residents and families with a tablet.

Providers are building joy and connection for older adults in what will likely be the hardest days of their lives -- and they should have to do it alone.

In addition to our continued, urgent requests to Congress, today LeadingAge is also making a plea to the public. Together with leaders of our state associations around the country, we've released an open letter on behalf of more than 5,000 mission-driven aging services providers.

We are asking our fellow Americans for help. The coronavirus has killed more than 170,000 older adults--but a few simple precautions can help ensure we don't add more lives to that horrific death toll.

We're asking that everyone wear a mask, stay socially distant, and wash their hands regularly this holiday season. We fully understand that some people may not like these steps, but taking them means you are protecting your older relatives and others in your community.

What we do now -- all of us: Congress, aging services providers and everyday Americans -- what we all do now will determine if we protect or endanger the lives of the older adults we love.

I am humbled by the dedication and care required by providers -- who somehow find the time and energy to pay thoughtful attention to the people in their communities this Thanksgiving -- all while fighting a pandemic without all of the support and resources they need.

This Thanksgiving I am grateful for them. And to all of you who joined us today. By bringing attention to the ongoing needs of older adults and their care providers, you help ensure that our leaders and the public take action to stop more preventable deaths.

<Open for Questions>