



Steve Bahmer Remarks for
June 20 Telepresser with LeadingAge National

Over the last two weeks, Florida has become the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, averaging more than 11,000 new cases a day. Following last weekend's testing, more than 350,000 Floridians have tested positive for the coronavirus, and nearly 5,000 Florida residents have died.

If the coronavirus in Florida were a hurricane, its intensity in the last two weeks has reached Category 5 status, with record numbers of Floridians affected each passing day.

Among those most harshly impacted have been Florida's seniors and the long-term care workers who care for them. Nearly 2,400 long-term care residents and staff have died as a result of the virus, or just under 50% of all coronavirus-related deaths in the state.

Like a hurricane, this much was predictable. We've known for months that seniors in long-term care settings were at the greatest risk from the virus, not because of any failure on the part of providers, but because older adults living together in these settings tend to have underlying conditions that make them more susceptible.

But the storm is here, it is gathering intensity, and it is putting enormous pressure on the providers who care for Florida's most vulnerable citizens. Dramatically increased expenses related to enhanced cleaning requirements, screenings of all employees, testing of residents, much-deserved 'hero' pay for employees, increased overtime, staff replacement costs, and sharp increases in PPE usage and costs are simply unsustainable.

Our members report predicted operating losses as high as \$3 million per month across one system if conditions don't change soon. Although state resources have been very helpful in ensuring that all long-term care staff are routinely tested, we don't know what comes next if that state-funded testing ends in September. Members estimate costs of \$30,000 to \$300,000 per month for ongoing staff testing.

Meanwhile, there has been no relief for the heroic staff who care for seniors, and their fatigue is both understandable and clear.

Floridians know how to deal with hurricanes – through local, state, and federal partnerships that identify and deploy the necessary resources to get communities back on their feet as quickly as possible.

A similar effort is needed now. Later today, we will release a report on the current state of COVID-19 and its impact on Florida's senior population. The report will also highlight the uncertain future senior living providers face and the desperate need for action in Congress. That's why we're calling on Sen. Rubio and Sen. Scott to lead the way in championing LeadingAge's relief requests for senior living providers in the next COVID-19 relief bill. We need the federal government to join us in this effort, to deliver the resources that providers so desperately need to fight the virus and keep their residents and staff safe.

The request includes dedicated funding for long-term care providers to help offset the costs of PPE, staffing, and treating COVID-19 positive residents. It also includes funding for ongoing staff testing, and to assist with COVID-19 related costs for providers of affordable housing for seniors.

Older lives are not expendable. This is a moment that calls for leadership, and for a cohesive strategy to keep Florida's 5 million seniors safe – as well as seniors all across the country.

We are counting on Senators Rubio and Scott for that leadership.