

August 3, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Hubert H. Humphrey Building
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

On behalf of UsAgainstAlzheimer's (UsA2) and the 5.8 million Americans living with Alzheimer's, thank you for the Administration's leadership to expand COVID-19 testing to more staff in nursing homes. I am writing to urge you to go farther and require testing of all staff and residents in long-term care communities.

Expanded testing is particularly important for people living with dementia because nearly two-thirds of all U.S. nursing home residents have some type of cognitive impairment.

Since UsA2 wrote you about this issue in May, the Department has taken important and welcome steps to increase the number of nursing home residents and staff who are tested for COVID-19. This includes the recent Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) testing requirement for all nursing home staff under certain circumstances.

However, we believe that more steps are necessary to truly protect older adults in long-term care communities, which account for nearly 45 percent of all U.S. coronavirus-related deaths. CMS should require nursing homes to test all residents and staff on a regular basis, and the Department should provide resources necessary to make such testing possible. The stakes for medically-vulnerable nursing home residents – including those living with Alzheimer's disease – are simply too high to rely on testing policies that do not require testing all residents and staff in all nursing homes. As of July 15, only seven states had “ongoing, required testing of residents, staff or both.” This cannot stand as the national death toll passes 150,000 and nursing homes are hit especially hard.

People with Alzheimer's are already at high-risk for COVID-19 due to age, having multiple chronic conditions, and—for many—an inability to accurately report symptoms. The risk is even greater for those living in long-term care communities because people living with Alzheimer's often rely on a loved one to be their advocate and to notice changes in health and behavior. We know that the vast majority of caregivers cannot visit loved ones living in a long-term care community due to restrictions on visitors, so residents with dementia must rely on you to keep them safe.

National leadership is needed to control the spread of COVID-19 and reduce deaths of some of our most-vulnerable citizens in long-term care settings across the country. We implore you to require ongoing testing of all nursing home residents and staff. Please contact me if UsA2 can be helpful in your efforts.

Sincerely,



Russ Paulsen
Chief Operating Officer
UsAgainstAlzheimer's