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Section: Opinion

In virus battle, one nursing home got it right

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Dr. Anthony Fauci, our national immunology leader in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, shared some good news Wednesday. A second wave of the coronavirus is not inevitable. If we continue to wear masks, wash our hands often and maintain social distancing, we should be able to continue to contain the spread of the virus that has disrupted and ended so many lives.

While we practice those habits, the world's scientists will continue to dedicate their remarkable minds to finding treatments and creating a vaccine. While we wait, we must engage in a comprehensive review of the catastrophe that engulfed our state's nursing homes.

The Department of Public Health reports that there have been just over 3,800 deaths from the virus in Connecticut as of Wednesday. DPH reports 2,190 of those killed by the virus in Connecticut were state-licensed nursing home residents. An additional 306 were in assisted living facilities.

There are 25,000 licensed nursing home beds in the state. Fewer than 1% of the state's population bore a staggering proportion of the deaths from the from the pathogen.

"We again express the importance of understanding the spread of COVID-19 is a reflection of the pernicious character of the virus," three nursing home and assisted living industry leaders wrote in a recent joint statement, "and is in no way a reflection of the quality of the health care facility - or the care it provides." We need to find out if that is true, because the heartbreaking death toll suggests it may not be.

Not every nursing home is the same. Center for Medicare and Medicaid rates them on a scale of one to five. DPH has released figures, not always quickly, during this public health crisis on the number of COVID-19 cases, confirmed deaths from the virus and probable deaths from it. It makes for grim reading.

At a few of the state's 215 licensed nursing homes, 20% of the residents died from the virus. Overall, almost 10% of the state's nursing home residents died from COVID-19. Some nursing homes had almost no deaths. There are variables among nursing homes. Some may have more infirm patients than others.

One of the largest nursing homes in the state, Masonicare in Wallingford, had 340 patients when the pandemic began. It has, according to DPH, had eight cases and one death. That is an extraordinary success.

On Wednesday, Ann Collette, vice president of strategy at Masonicare, provided a narrative of how it handled the outbreak. Its CEO, Jon-Paul Venoit, acted early. Visitors were banned in early March. Non-essential employees were told to stay at home to act as a reserve if other workers became ill. One employee spent all his time locating personal protection equipment. When masks were in short supply, people in the community began making them for patients and workers at the facility. Anyone with signs of the virus - testing was slow in the early going - was isolated. Employees were screened often. Donning and doffing of PPE policies were updated and expanded.

The Masonicare record seems like more than a three-month run of good luck. We need to know why there are so many disparities. Gov. Ned Lamont should appoint an independent panel to investigate what went wrong at so many state-licensed facilities, and also what practices worked. It should be led by two former judges, Christopher Droney, recently retired from the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, and former Superior Court Judge Jane Emons.

Droney served as the mayor of West Hartford and the U.S. Attorney for Connecticut before serving on the federal bench. Emons is a former state prosecutor and was a notably respected Assistant Attorney General before she became a state judge. In 2018, Emons became the victim of anti-Semitic smears and William Tong's campaign for attorney general when she was denied a second term on the bench. Her vile treatment continues to resonate through state government.

Droney and Emons possess the confidence, intellect and range of experience the task requires. Both are public-spirited but not in politics. Lamont should call on their talents, provide them with resources and invest them with the authority to find out why so many elderly Connecticut residents died in state-licensed nursing homes.

Let us begin now, so it does not happen again if Dr. Fauci's optimism is misplaced.

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