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BUSINESS

# Assisted-Living Facilities Are Vulnerable to Coronavirus

Homes for the elderly in Florida and elsewhere grapple with threat of infection of residents and staff



Residents at John Knox Village, a retirement community in Pompano Beach, Florida, late last month. About a million Americans live in assisted-living facilities, which some experts say are more vulnerable to the coronavirus than nursing homes are.

PHOTO: CHANDAN KHANNA/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By Elizabeth Koh and Arian Campo-Flores

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MIAMI—Assisted-living facilities, a booming but lightly regulated industry that houses roughly a million elderly patients in Florida and across the nation, are ill-prepared for the novel coronavirus, some health authorities say.

Six deaths from Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, occurred at the Atria Willow Wood assisted-living facility in Fort Lauderdale since mid-March, a worrisome sign in a state with more than 4 million residents aged 65 and older.

Cathy Weaver, a 77-year-old resident at Willow Wood, praised staff at the facility for continuing to work and clean and for organizing occasional serenades by folk musicians. But the deaths of fellow residents left her heartbroken and fearful.

“I’m sort of resigned to whatever comes,” Ms. Weaver said. “Maybe this is the way I’m going to go.”



Virus Cleanup: Disinfecting Cruises, Nursing Homes, and Hospitals

As many businesses around the world struggle, a Canadian disinfectant company is increasing production to keep up with demand during the novel coronavirus outbreak. Photo: Ron Kolumbus/WSJ

Assisted-living facilities, which range from homes with a handful of beds to large complexes, are aimed at residents who need support but don’t require 24-hour nursing care like those in nursing homes.

In Florida, where nearly two-thirds of these facilities have 17 beds or fewer, they frequently have less equipment and infrastructure than nursing homes. Staffing levels tend to be lighter and the employees receive less training.

“The community spread is exponentially faster in an [assisted-living facility] than it would be in a nursing home,” said Brian Lee, a former long-term care ombudsman in Florida who now runs an advocacy group for residents. “They’re just not prepared to be as responsive as a nursing home would be.”

More than 400 long-term care facilities nationally—including nursing homes and assisted-living facilities—have reported having at least one Covid-19-positive case, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as of late March. The Life Care Center of Kirkland, Wash., a nursing home, remains the [single deadliest known concentration](#) of coronavirus infection in the U.S., tied to more than 35 deaths.

The CDC didn’t delineate between assisted-living centers and nursing homes in its tally, but news reports show the virus has shown up in assisted-living facilities in numerous states, including Massachusetts, Tennessee, Minnesota and Oregon.

Florida, which has the second-highest proportion of people aged 65 and over among states, behind Maine, highlights the challenges facing such institutions. The state is home to about 3,000 assisted-living facilities with more than 106,000 beds.

Assisted-living facilities in the U.S. are subject to little to no federal oversight, a relic of decades past when such facilities were smaller and took less Medicaid money. Though they have grown in popularity—and the level of care their residents need has increased—oversight remains almost exclusively at the state level.

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What have you noticed about the vulnerability of assisted-living facilities in your region? Join the conversation below.

Those state regulations, covering issues such as the frequency of inspections and requirements for infection control, can vary dramatically. In the face of pressure from industry groups, Florida has taken a light-handed approach to regulating assisted-living facilities. Lawmakers watered down a bill in 2015 meant to address reports of abuse and neglect at several

facilities and weakened the state’s long-term care ombudsman program that advocates for residents.

The state’s facilities follow CDC guidelines on infection control and are working with state agencies to ensure they have the proper equipment and protocols to guard against the virus, said Nick Van Der Linden, a spokesman for LeadingAge Florida, which represents such institutions.

Larry Polivka, director of the Claude Pepper Center, an institution at Florida State University that researches elder issues, said while regulations at assisted-living facilities don’t need to be as stringent as at nursing homes, they should be increased as the population needing significant medical care grows.

At least 250 cases of Covid-19 have emerged in long-term care facilities in the state, with the greatest numbers in the counties that are home to Miami, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach and Jacksonville. The state has declined to name the facilities or provide additional information, such as how many are assisted-living facilities, citing concerns over health privacy.

Florida’s Agency for Health Care Administration said it is monitoring long-term care facilities closely for appropriate isolation and infection control and has visited more than 700 of them since early March, spokesman Patrick Manderfield said.

Sandra Tucker, who lives at the Camellia at Deerwood facility in Jacksonville, said she tested negative for Covid-19, but several of her acquaintances in the building, which includes independent and assisted living, are hospitalized with the disease. The operator of the facility, Grace Management Inc., didn’t respond to emailed questions.

Ms. Tucker, who is 75 years old, said she barely leaves her apartment, occupying her time painting and designing Christmas cards. The building has been on lockdown for more than two weeks, she said, and the state health department visited to ensure areas were properly sterilized.

“This is pretty scary times here,” she said.

The coronavirus has highlighted how assisted-living facilities weren’t designed to provide full-on medical care, health experts say. Some have struggled to procure enough personal protective equipment like masks and gowns.

Others have worked to find more tests, for both their residents and staff.

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Doug Adkins, who runs a pair of assisted-living facilities near Jacksonville, said he paid for private tests to be shipped from Miami Beach for about 180 residents and staff after some of his workers waited hours outside a federal test site.

Shelley Esden, who operates 11 Florida facilities, said after weeks of attempting to obtain enough tests, her chain had secured enough kits to test residents and staffers at all its locations last week. She did have enough personal protective equipment for her staff at the Sonata Senior Living chain, she noted—only because she rushed to put in orders at the start of March. She said the cost for surgical masks was about 50% to 75% higher than normal.

“A few days after that there weren’t any supplies,” Ms. Esden said. “They went that quick.”

On Thursday, two of Ms. Esden’s facilities in Palm Beach County received positive Covid-19 test results for 2 staffers and 13 residents. All had been asymptomatic, she said. Proactively testing everyone “has allowed us to prevent further spread,” she added, urging other facilities to follow suit.

Gov. Ron DeSantis has singled out Atria Willow Wood for criticism. He said an investigation revealed that sick construction workers on the premises and staff members weren’t properly screened and were allowed to mingle with residents.

Atria Senior Living Inc., the Louisville, Ky.-based operator of the facility, said Mr. DeSantis’s comments were “inaccurate and unproductive” and that Willow Wood was already screening all visitors before the state provided guidance.

After confirmation of the first case in the community, administrators asked residents to stay at home, checked their temperatures three times a day and delivered meals to their apartments, according to emailed responses from Atria.

One staff member and 20 residents have tested positive for Covid-19, including the six who died, the company said.

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BACK TO TOP ▲