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Growing shortages of supplies threaten long-term care's aggressive fight against Coronavirus

CHARLESTON -- The State of West Virginia's early, aggressive protections of the elderly and vulnerable residents against COVID-19 in long-term care facilities are at risk of being nullified if the supplies of personal protective equipment, or PPE, continue to dry up. With more than 20,000 health care workers caring for nearly 12,000 residents in long-term care statewide, the demand for personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, gowns, face shields) is unable to be met by traditional vendors and supply chains.

"West Virginia's long-term care facilities were among the first in the nation to enact aggressive measures to protect residents from Covid-19. However, these measures risk being undone if facilities are unable to find new sources of personal protective equipment," said Marty Wright, CEO of the West Virginia Health Care Association. "Many facilities have been trying for weeks to find alternative sources, even paying outrageous prices, only to see the orders go unfulfilled or indefinitely delayed."

"With each new week comes new federal guidance advocating for greater use of personal protective equipment, yet the availability of PPE can't meet the growing demand. Our state's long-term care workers, who care for roughly 12,000 of our most vulnerable West Virginians, are certainly experiencing the stress and anxiety that accompanies a lack of gowns, gloves and masks. They know the dangers the coronavirus presents, especially to the residents in their care, and are reaching out for assistance." Wright continued.

"Our long-term care workers are extremely grateful for the outpouring of community support they have received during this healthcare crisis. The efforts underway to supplement personal protective equipment with homemade masks have been both heartwarming and impactful." Wright said. "Even the West Virginia National Guard is exploring innovative ways to sterilize masks so they can be reused."

The lack of PPE is a national issue plaguing health care workers and has even led to recent changes in CDC guidance encouraging conservation of PPE. Concern, however, remains for health care workers in long-term care, prompting an express request by the U.S. Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) "urg[ing] state and local leaders to consider the needs of long-term care facilities with respect to supplies of PPE and COVID-19 tests." [CMS guidance to LTC (April 2, 2020)

<https://www.cms.gov/files/document/4220-covid-19-long-term-care-facility-guidance.pdf>

“There is no question that the challenges relating to COVID-19 are numerous, and the list seems to grow every day. However, providing PPE for health care workers, especially for those in long-term care, quickly needs to rise to the top of the priority list.” Wright concluded.

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The West Virginia Health Care Association is West Virginia’s largest trade association representing nursing facilities and assisted living communities. The WVHCA is dedicated to helping maintain high standards of care for licensed long-term care facilities through leadership, education and advocacy. Its member facilities employ more than 18,000 people and care for around 10,000 West Virginians daily.