



MARCH 2022

# Inadequate Staffing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

AND ITS CATASTROPHIC EFFECTS ON  
NURSING HOMES RESIDENTS



On March 13, 2020, the federal and state governments locked down nursing homes, prohibiting visitation, and preventing family members from visiting their loved ones. As a result, longstanding staff shortages were exacerbated by the absence of families, who often provided informal care and support to residents. At the same time, nursing home staff were contracting COVID-19 or leaving their positions, which worsened existing staff shortages. Compounding the problem was the absence of long-term care ombudsmen and state regulators, meaning that there was little to no scrutiny of care in nursing homes. Many nursing homes staff could not make up for this lost source of assistance, and the result was neglect, isolation, and harm to residents.

*"In my facility, if they can improve on the staffing level that will help with infection control, because when you have two CNAs covering 60 residents it is very difficult to be as tight with infection control as you should be. I think if they increase their wages that would help as well. Staffing is worse than the pandemic itself, it is very straining on the staff which trickles down to us." - Nursing Home Resident*

*"There are many days where I have 10 minutes or less per day with an aid, it is usually about 10 minutes per day with a nurse." - Nursing Home Resident*

Inadequate staffing has plagued nursing homes for decades. Studies have repeatedly shown that significant numbers of our nation's nursing homes fail to adequately staff their facilities.<sup>1</sup> Nursing homes with higher levels of staffing, however, provide better care to residents. A review of 87 research articles and reports from 1975-2003 found that nursing homes with higher staffing levels had residents with better health outcomes, including in the areas of functional ability, pressure ulcers, and weight loss.<sup>2</sup>

The deadly results of inadequate staffing were made even more clear during the COVID-19 pandemic. While almost 150,000<sup>3</sup> nursing home residents and staff have died from COVID-19, countless others have suffered in poorly staffed facilities from isolation and neglect. A report by the Associated Press estimated that from March 2020 to November 2020 there had been 40,000 excess deaths of nursing home residents from non-COVID-19 related causes, when compared to the same time period the year before.<sup>4</sup>

In January 2021, the National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care (Consumer Voice) published a report "The Devastating Effect of Lockdowns on Residents of Long-Term Care Facilities During COVID-19: A Survey of Residents' Families"<sup>5</sup> documenting the declines in the physical and mental status of residents and the living conditions they endured during the pandemic. More than 80% of the family members surveyed reported severe declines in their loved one's physical and mental well-being, using phrases such as "so skinny and weak, near death," "completely disengaged," and "unkempt" to describe the lockdown's effect on their loved one's condition. Residents themselves called the facilities "a prison" and were "begging to be taken home."

The Consumer Voice's analysis of data available from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) confirms the reports from families. Every quarter, CMS publishes aggregate

<sup>1</sup> Geng F, Stevenson DG, Grabowski DC. Daily nursing home staffing levels highly variable, often below CMS expectations. Health Aff. 2019;38(7):1095-1100; Harrington C, Schnelle JF, McGregor M, Simmons SF. The need for minimum staffing standards in nursing homes. Health Serv Insights. 2016;9:13-19

<sup>2</sup> Bostick, J.E., Rantz, M.J., Flesner, M.K. and Riggs, C.J. (2006). Systematic review of studies of staffing and quality in nursing homes. J. Am Med Dir Assoc. 7:366-376.

<sup>3</sup> <https://data.cms.gov/covid-19/covid-19-nursing-home-data>

<sup>4</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/nursing-homes-neglect-death-surge-3b74a2202140c5a6b5cf05cdf0ea4f32>

<sup>5</sup> [https://theconsumervoicework.org/uploads/files/issues/Devasting\\_Effect\\_of\\_Lockdowns\\_on\\_Residents\\_of\\_LTC\\_Facilities.pdf](https://theconsumervoicework.org/uploads/files/issues/Devasting_Effect_of_Lockdowns_on_Residents_of_LTC_Facilities.pdf)

data from the Minimum Data Set (MDS).<sup>6</sup> The most recent publicly available data is from the second quarter of 2021. The MDS is a federally mandated comprehensive clinical assessment that all nursing homes must complete and submit to CMS. It gauges a variety of measures, such as health diagnosis, medications, falls, and treatment.

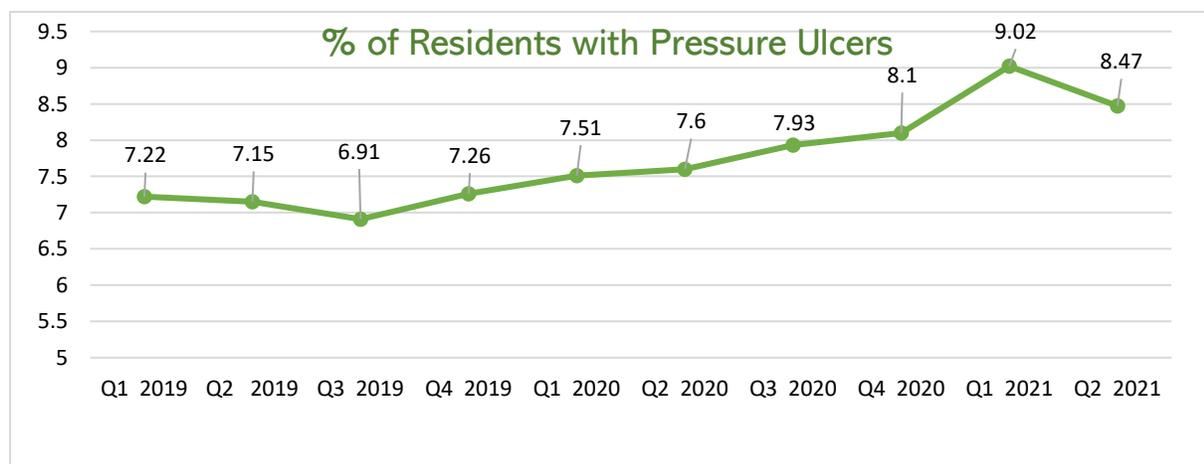
Throughout the pandemic, roughly 20% of nursing homes have reported staffing shortages, more recently that number has grown to 30%.<sup>7</sup> Because of these shortages, many residents simply went without care, including adequate feeding, toileting, and hygiene assistance, which resulted in physical and mental decline for many residents. Even though staffing shortages continue, some MDS data are showing conditions beginning to decline again. One difference is that families, ombudsmen, and surveyors, were going into facilities again and fulfilling their roles, including providing support to residents, raising and responding to complaints, and overseeing facility conditions.

The absence of adequate staffing resulted in the increased presence of inadequately trained staff. At the beginning of the pandemic, CMS waived the training requirements for certified nursing assistants (CNAs).<sup>8</sup> As a result, most newly hired staff received a little as 8 hours of training, instead of the minimum required 75 hours, and did not know how to address the complex needs of nursing home residents. The waiver remains in place today.

On February 28, 2022, the Biden Administration announced [landmark nursing home reforms](#). The Biden Administration acknowledged the problem of inadequate staffing both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the Biden Administration will be conducting a study on minimum staffing standards and implementing a national federal standard. The Consumer Voice applauds this decision by the Biden Administration. Much of what is documented in this report could have been avoided with adequate nursing home staffing.

Below is a sampling of the MDS data documenting the decline in care during the pandemic, due to in large part to inadequate staffing.<sup>9</sup>

### During the pandemic, the number of residents experiencing pressure ulcers rose 31%



From the fourth quarter of 2019 (Q4 2019) and to Q2 2021, the number of residents with at least one unhealed pressure ulcer – also known as bedsores, rose almost 31%. Residents who

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Computer-Data-and-Systems/Minimum-Data-Set-3-0-Public-Reports/Minimum-Data-Set-3-0-Frequency-Report>

<sup>7</sup> <https://data.cms.gov/covid-19/covid-19-nursing-home-data>

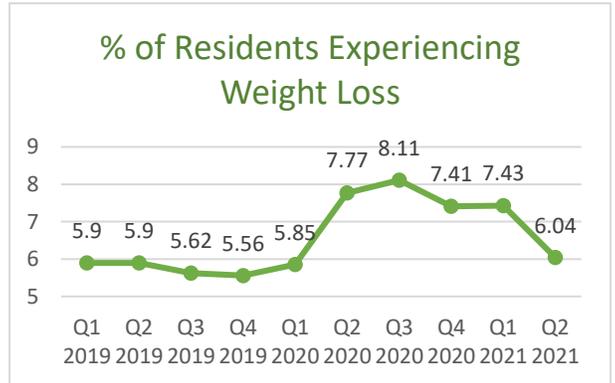
<sup>8</sup> <https://www.cms.gov/files/document/covid-19-emergency-declaration-waivers.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Currently, only data up to the second quarter of 2021 is available.

are confined to their beds must be re-positioned regularly to avoid pressure ulcers developing on their skin. Pressure ulcers can become infected easily and lead to deadly conditions such as sepsis. This significant rise in the frequency of pressure ulcers illustrates that residents were not receiving appropriate care.

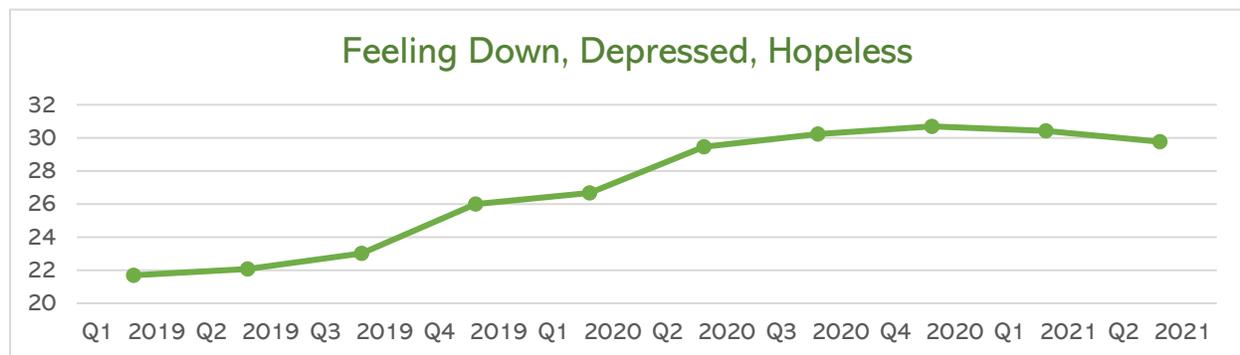
**The number of residents experiencing significant weight loss rose 49% during the pandemic.**

The number of residents who lost at least 5% of their body weight in the preceding month or at least 10% in the preceding six months rose approximately 46% from Q4 2019 to Q3 2020. Weight loss was one of the most frequently raised concerns by family members in Consumer Voice’s January 2021 report. Notably, these numbers stopped increasing, and in fact began to decline as visitation restrictions were lifted and families became reunited with their loved ones.



**The number of residents reporting feeling down, depressed, or hopeless rose 40% during the pandemic.**

Residents were also suffering emotionally and mentally. Cut off from their loved ones and without adequate staff, most residents had to remain in their rooms, doors closed to the hallway, unable to see anyone other than the few staff who entered a couple times a day. As a result, many residents reported high rates of depression. The number of residents reporting feeling down, depressed, or hopeless for at least two days in the past two weeks spiked from a little over a fifth of the population in Q1 2019 to just under a third of the population at the height of the pandemic in Q4 2020 - an increase of over 40%. The National Institute on Aging reports that depression in older adults can, in turn, contribute to physical health issues including cognitive impairment, difficulty sleeping, and unplanned weight loss.<sup>10</sup>



**The increase in the rate of residents receiving antipsychotic medications jumped 77.5%, while the increase in the rate of residents being diagnosed with schizophrenia rose 54%.**

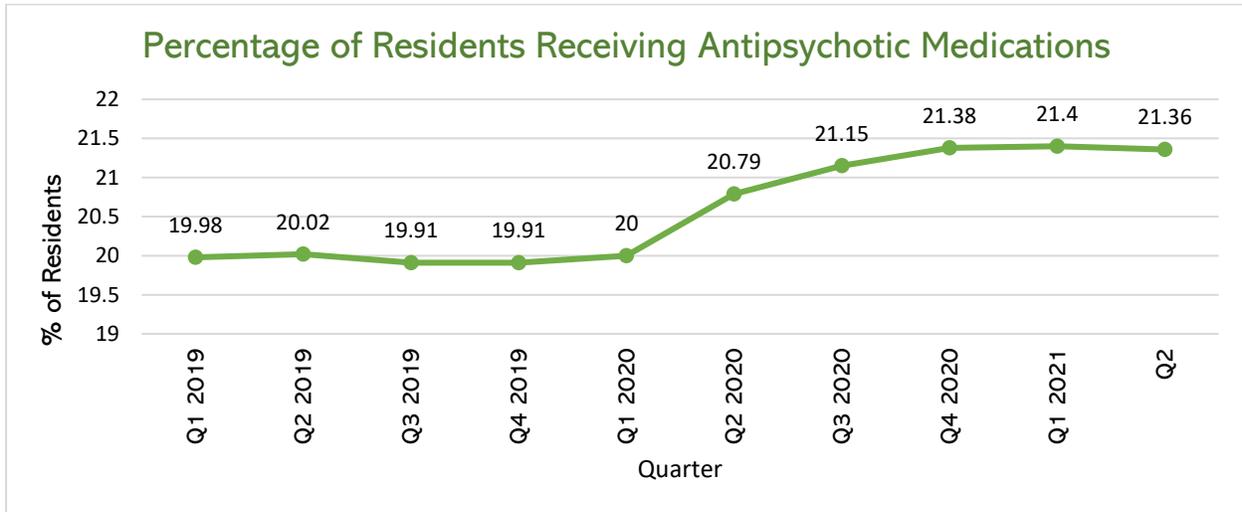
The CMS data reveals that there was an alarming increase in both the number of schizophrenia diagnoses and the sedative medications used to treat the condition. The use of antipsychotic medications to sedate residents or control behaviors, has long plagued nursing homes.<sup>11</sup> Understaffed facilities are more likely to use antipsychotic drugs to sedate residents

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/depression-and-older-adults#signs>

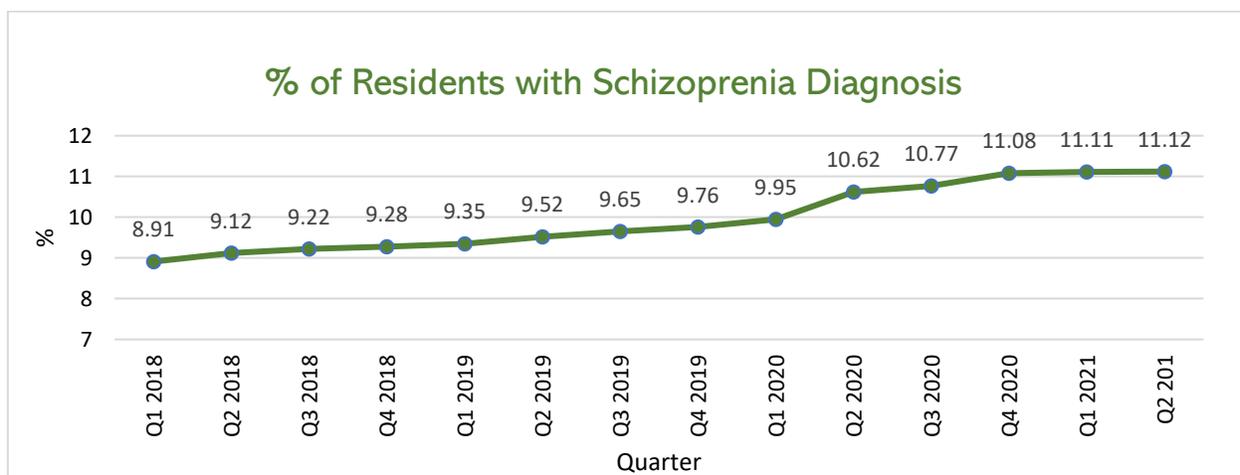
<sup>11</sup> <https://oig.hhs.gov/oei/reports/oei-07-08-00150.pdf>

with “troublesome behaviors”, rather than identifying and providing care.<sup>12</sup> Despite it being illegal, the problem persists.

The increase in the rate of residents receiving antipsychotics jumped 77.5% in Q1 2021 during the pandemic, compared to the average increase for the quarters beginning in 2018 and ending in the fourth quarter of 2019. As you can see from the chart below, the numbers continued to rise, as the pandemic progressed.



There was also a significant rise in the number of residents with a diagnosis of schizophrenia in Q1 2020, again the quarter when the pandemic again. In September 2021, the *New York Times* reported that there had been a 70% increase in schizophrenia diagnoses for nursing home residents between 2012 and 2021.<sup>13</sup> Schizophrenia rarely develops later in life. It is most commonly diagnosed in a person’s 20s.<sup>14</sup> In Q1 of 2020 increase in the rate of residents receiving a diagnosis of schizophrenia jumped 54% compared to the average increase for the period of time from Q1 2018 to Q4 2019.



<sup>12</sup> Mattingly TJ 2nd. A Review Exploring the Relationship Between Nursing Home Staffing and Antipsychotic Medication Use. *Neural Ther.* 2015;4(2):169-175. doi:10.1007/s40120-015-0032-2

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/11/health/nursing-homes-schizophrenia-antipsychotics.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/schizophrenia/what-is-schizophrenia>

In September 2021, the *New York Times* reported that 1 in 5 residents in nursing facilities across the country were receiving potent antipsychotic drugs. The *Times* article surmised that many of the residents' diagnoses were "phony," and only put in place "so [nursing homes] don't have to hire more staff to handle residents."<sup>15</sup> Shockingly, the *New York Times* found that 1 in 9 nursing home residents had a diagnosis of schizophrenia, compared to 1 in 150 in the overall population in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

The MDS data suggest that many facilities relied on antipsychotics and false diagnoses of schizophrenia to make up for inadequate staffing. In Consumer Voice's July 2021 report significant numbers of family members reported a decline in their loved one's mental demeanor. For example, one family member said their loved one "Appears to be drugged, head hanging down, no or very little response when spoken to."

## Abusing Schizophrenia Diagnoses

One in 150 Americans have a Schizophrenia diagnosis. Compared with 1 in 9 nursing home residents.

### Adequate Staffing as the Solution

The MDS data along with the experience of residents and their families demonstrate what happens to residents when there is inadequate staffing in nursing homes. Pre-existing staff shortages were made even more critical when family members were banned from facilities and nursing home staff who got sick or left for other reasons. Although family members have now been reunited with their loved ones, that does not solve the problem. We must invest in staffing, which includes ensuring necessary training, adequate pay and benefits, and improved working conditions. A report from March 2021 found on average an excess of 100% turnover in staff in one year in facilities.<sup>17</sup> Inadequate pay, poor training, and high stress conditions make nursing home jobs unattractive and subject to significant attrition.

The problem of inadequate staff is largely attributable to the lack of a federal minimum staffing standard. A 2001 study commissioned by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services found that at least 4.1 hours of direct care per resident day was necessary to prevent poor resident outcomes.<sup>18</sup> Despite this finding and the exhaustive academic research demonstrating that better staffing leads to better health outcomes, CMS did not implement a minimum staffing standard.

However, on February 28, 2022, the Biden Administration announced that CMS will now implement a staffing standard. This responds to a decades long problem and will help address the primary driver of poor care in nursing homes, inadequate staffing.

The current crisis of inadequate staffing is also a byproduct of years of failure to invest in staff wages, benefits, and training. We frequently call nursing home staff heroes, yet we pay them wages that are incommensurate with the skilled work that they do. Inadequate staffing burdens underpaid staff with unmanageable workloads that leads to high rates of turnover

<sup>15</sup> [Id.](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Id.](#)

<sup>17</sup> Gandhi A, Yu H, Grabowski DC. High Nursing Staff Turnover In Nursing Homes Offers Important Quality Information. *Health Aff (Millwood)*. 2021 Mar;40(3):384-391. doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2020.00957. PMID: 33646872; PMCID: PMC7992115.

<sup>18</sup> Abt Associates for U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, "Appropriateness of Minimum Nurse Staffing Ratios in Nursing Homes." December 2001

and high stress. Until we invest in workers, the issue of inadequate staffing will never be addressed.

In 2021, Congress introduced the [Nursing Home Improvement and Accountability Act](#) (S. 2694, H.R. 5169). The Act sought to address several of the problems cited in the Biden Administration's February 28, 2022, announcement, including investing in staff wages, benefits and training, increasing enforcement and oversight, and transparency in how nursing homes spend taxpayer dollars. We call on Congress to continue its work to protect nursing home residents and to take every step necessary to ensure the new policies announced by the Biden Administration are put into place.

Requiring a minimum staffing standard and investing in staff will save lives and increase positive health outcomes for over 1.1 million nursing home residents. The MDS data and the Consumer Voice's "Devastating Effects of Lockdowns" report from 2021 document some of this suffering. But for hundreds of thousands nursing home residents who have died from COVID-19 and neglect during the pandemic, their voices will never be heard.

We must act now to ensure that residents receive the high-quality care they deserve and that the horrors of the past two years are never repeated.



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