

Nursing Homes: CMS' Call To Test Residents Unrealistic Without Funding

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CMS' recommendation that all nursing home residents receive COVID-19 testing before opening has spurred new calls from the nursing home lobby for additional funding as they continue to face difficulties obtaining tests and personal protective equipment.

CMS on Monday (May 18) recommended that all nursing home residents and staff be tested at least once before the facilities reopen -- but the agency has yet to mandate testing, [instead leaving the decision up to the states on how to implement guidance](#).

CMS states in a fact sheet that testing should be done proactively in nursing homes and points out that the agency recently offered a pay rate of \$100 for labs that do rapid-testing for COVID-19. The agency also pointed out that last month it called for states to work closely with nursing homes on acquiring tests and personal protective equipment.

In a call Monday, CMS Administrator Seema Verma said she felt as though states had sufficient testing for all nursing home residents.

On Capitol Hill and in some states, there's been a call to mandate testing in nursing homes. Some states, including New York and South Carolina, have already done so.

A New York State Department of Health spokesperson told *Inside Health Policy* that potential barriers to a state executive order requiring testing have been removed "by sending 320,000 testing kits directly to facilities this week and connecting all facilities with commercial labs that have capacity to manage tens of thousands of tests daily."

At a Senate Special Committee on Aging hearing Thursday (May 21), several lawmakers expressed support for universal testing, including committee Chair Susan Collins (R-ME). She asked how often testing should be done.

Tamara Konetzka, professor of health services research at the University of Chicago, told the committee it should be frequent and should include testing residents who aren't showing symptoms in case they're already carrying the disease. If facilities wait until residents show symptoms, "By then, it's too late," she said.

But the nursing home lobby has repeatedly said universal testing cannot happen without further funding or a testing plan from CMS. The American Health Care Association and National Center for Assisted Living released a state-by-state breakdown on Wednesday (May 20) that estimated it would cost \$440 million to test all nursing home residents and staff just once.

"States are varying in their testing approach, but we hope governors will prioritize resources for testing in long term care settings. Some states have committed to helping cover the cost and are sending out logistical support like the National Guard, while others have issued blanket orders. With varying policies, availability and turnaround

time, some providers have taken it upon themselves to work with private labs to conduct testing. This creates a real burden for providers,” Mark Parkinson, AHCA/NCAL president, told *Inside Health Policy*.

The group pointed to the analysis to reiterate its call for an additional \$10 billion in emergency relief for nursing homes to expand testing capacity.

Some states have focused testing on priority populations or called on the National Guard for help with testing, such as in Maryland, a spokesperson for the National Governors Association said. The spokesperson noted that testing capacity has increased generally in the past few weeks, and more testing outlets, including drive-up testing has become available. However, governors in COVID-19 hotspots continue to see a shortage of testing capacity.

In Pennsylvania, Adam Marles, president of LeadingAge PA, said on a webinar on May 15 that long-term care facilities continue to report a shortage of PPE and tests. He also said one-time testing isn’t enough and called for daily rapid-testing for staff.

LeadingAge criticized CMS on Monday, calling its suggestion that all states could test nursing home residents unrealistic.

“We need access to adequate testing supplies and PPE. And we need funding to make both of those possible for the brave people who care for vulnerable older adults day in and day out,” the group said at the time.

Cynthia Morton, executive vice president of the National Association For The Support of Long-Term Care, said CMS’ recommendation leaves many questions unanswered. She noted that an increase in testing will mean facilities will burn through PPE faster, potentially exacerbating shortages. She also questioned what a long-term plan might look like if testing reveals that many staff members have COVID-19 and some are asymptomatic. She also asked how nursing homes will be able to pay labs for frequent tests.

“NASL supports testing but the practicalities of it are going to be very difficult and we don’t see any plans for how this will be carried out,” she told *Inside Health Policy*.

At the hearing Thursday, Sen. Tim Scott (R-SC) called for a portion of the provider relief fund to be allocated for nursing homes, as he also touted a mandate from his home state to test all nursing home residents and said that will be done by the end of June.

“They need the resources, supplies, and tests as soon as possible,” he said of the nursing homes.

The committee’s Ranking Democrat Bob Casey (D-PA) called on Congress on Thursday to prioritize funding for nursing homes. He touted a bill he introduced with Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) that would provide \$20 billion in emergency funding to states, territories and tribal governments to support staffing, testing and PPE in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. - *Chelsea Cirruzzo* (ccirruzzo@iwpnews.com)