

April 24, 2020

Letter to the Editor

CEO Message: Wisconsin's Long-Term Care Providers Are Community Partners in the Fight Against COVID-19

It has been my privilege every day for the last 30 years to serve on behalf of hundreds of mission-driven and faith-based long-term care (LTC) organizations throughout Wisconsin who provide compassionate care and services to the most vulnerable individuals within our communities. These LTC organizations represent the nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and community-based service providers who make up the heart and soul of our Wisconsin communities. Their residents are the retired teachers, farmers, doctors, homemakers, veterans, and business people who have spent their lives building our small towns, raising up our urban cities and contributing to their success. Now more than ever, these organizations need our support!

As the novel coronavirus sweeps across our country and throughout our state, there are critically important efforts taking place on many health care fronts to control the spread of the disease. Both hospitals and LTC providers are working tirelessly to protect their patients and residents, particularly those who are elderly or suffer serious medical conditions and are at the highest risk of life-threatening illness should they become infected with COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus.

Long-term care workers at nursing homes and assisted living facilities in our communities throughout Wisconsin are on the front lines of any coronavirus outbreak. These caregivers, the heroes within our health care system, strive every day to provide the best possible care to their patients and residents who are frail, elderly or recuperating from a recent hospitalization. Their jobs are not easy, their work is both physically and emotionally demanding, and now in a time of crisis, we are asking them to put themselves and possibly their families at risk to care for our loved ones. For Wisconsin LTC providers their focus has to remain on providing the utmost safety and protection of their residents and the staff who care for them. I am disheartened as I see more and more nursing homes and assisted living facilities across the country come under negative scrutiny in light of outbreaks of COVID-19 among their residents and within their facilities. These broad-brush reviews rarely tell the full story or, more importantly, reflect Wisconsin's reality.

During the next few weeks and months, the needs of our health care system will shift as our communities begin to open back up from shelter in place orders. However, LTC providers will continue to be tasked with the critical mission of protecting and safeguarding the health of older adults who will remain most vulnerable to any potential future outbreaks. Wisconsin nursing home and assisted living facility providers will continue to put in place the necessary precautions to protect their residents and staff in the face of an already acute workforce shortage and insufficient Medicaid reimbursement rates. They will make admission decisions to their facilities that will continue to be thoughtful and transparent, while respecting the needs of current and prospective residents. They will find creative ways to allow their residents to communicate with their loved ones, while minimizing the potential for exposure. They are committed to maintaining the safety of their residents and staff during very uncertain times and without the guarantee of additional resources.

These are trying times for everyone, and Wisconsin LTC providers need the support of their communities to recognize that a facility with COVID-19 residents does not represent a failure, but in fact, it may better represent the courage of an organization to meet a community need. Through our state's policies and priorities, I urge our lawmakers and community leaders to reflect on the financial needs and necessary supports for Wisconsin's LTC organizations now and in the future. The services they provide are fundamental to the people they serve, their families and our communities. Wisconsin's LTC providers are and will remain trusted, caring community partners well beyond the pandemic.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Sauer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "S".

John Sauer
President & CEO
LeadingAge Wisconsin