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Coronavirus spreads to 3 state-run facilities for those with mental illness, developmental disabilities

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 16, 2020, 10:02 a.m.



Massachusetts Army National Guard stood by while Governor Charlie Baker and Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito toured a field medical station. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Three state-run medical centers that serve people with chronic conditions, mental illness, and intellectual disabilities are reporting widespread COVID-19 outbreaks among their live-in patients and staff.

In recent days, teams from either the National Guard or a local ambulance company were brought in to each facility to conduct testing, according to state officials. The spread of the virus presents a particular challenge for these facilities, which are trying to quell the disease while serving a vulnerable group with complex mental and medical conditions.

State officials said that, as of Tuesday, 67 patients and 46 staff had tested positive at the 394-bed Tewksbury Hospital. At the 255-bed Lemuel Shattuck Hospital in Jamaica Plain, 37 patients and 23 staff had tested positive. Both facilities specialize in providing long-term treatment for adults.

Officials also identified at least 44 positive cases among residents and 55 staff at the Hogan Regional Center in Danvers, according to the Massachusetts Nurses Association, a union that represents health care workers at each site. The facility houses and provides long-term care for about 120 people with intellectual and development disabilities.

None of the facilities have seen the same deadly consequences as nursing homes, which serve populations in the age range considered most at risk for complications from coronavirus. Nearly half of the state's deaths have been attributed to those types of long-term care facilities. Still, many of the obstacles that nursing homes face also are prevalent at these chronic care facilities, and officials are preparing for the worst.

“It is a terribly challenging time, but people have come together and we have leadership [at the facilities] that is determined to get the resources these centers need,” said Danna Mauch, president and CEO of the Massachusetts

Association for Mental Health, an advocacy group.

State officials said the facilities have been following federal and state guidelines to protect patients and staff.

“We are and will continue to do everything in our power to ensure an aggressive and rapid response to COVID-19 confirmed cases at facilities operated and overseen by the Commonwealth,” said a statement from the state’s Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

Officials said they have implemented measures such as isolating infected patients, restricting visitors, and taking employees’ temperatures and screening for symptoms before they enter buildings. Patients now eat meals in their rooms instead of in common areas.

However, cutting off access to loved ones and disrupting routines can be particularly hard for people living in such facilities, potentially leading to confusion, anxiety, and depression, advocates said.

Kathy Marith said her brother Dan, 63, a resident at the Hogan center, recently tested positive for COVID-19. So far, he’s been symptom-free, she said.

She worries not only for him, but for the facility’s many other residents, especially elderly and frail patients.

“I’m nervous for all of them,” said Marith, who has been in close contact with the staff, whom she credited with being proactive in trying to prevent the virus’s spread.

Chronic care facilities have long struggled to maintain adequate staffing, a problem driven by low compensation, according to Mauch, of the mental health advocacy association. That issue has been exacerbated, she said, by the ongoing crisis because workers have had to miss work because they’re sick themselves or caring for loved ones.

The nurses association, as well as officials at the Service Employees International Union Local 509, said they have urged state officials to provide on-site testing for workers at each facility. So far, widespread testing has been offered only for patients, union officials said. Workers are being tested only if symptomatic, and dozens have tested positive, they said.

“The only people going in and out of the facilities are the staff,” said nurses association spokesman David Schildmeier. “So it makes no sense to not be testing staff.”

Union officials said workers have also reported concerns in at least some facilities about the limited availability of personal protective equipment, with some staff rationing supplies such as masks. Peter MacKinnon, president of SEIU Local 509, said some social workers have told the union that because of staffing shortages they’re now being asked to take on front-line duties but without proper training.

State officials acknowledged staff are being asked to conserve protective gear, but insisted the equipment is available and the state is continuing to try to procure more supplies.

The state operates a handful of other hospitals and centers across Massachusetts that provide long-term specialty care. Altogether, those facilities have reported just one patient and seven staff members who have tested positive, state officials said, though they declined to provide figures for one facility, the Wrentham Developmental Center.

The state Department of Developmental Services, which runs the Hogan and Wrentham sites and operates or funds thousands of group homes statewide, said that, across its network, nine residents had died and 276 residents and 321 staff had tested positive for coronavirus, as of Tuesday. Testing is ongoing.

Tom Frain, whose brother lives in a group home, said while state officials have moved to test nursing home residents across the state, testing for people with developmental disabilities has been done too slowly. “People like my brother — they get nothing.”

“They’ve been functionally abandoned by the administration,” said Frain, president of COFAR, a local advocacy group for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. “We’re now in a solid six weeks of this and they did their first testing on Easter Sunday.”

“What are they waiting for?” he added. “Why is my brother so far at the end of the line?”

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