

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

TO:

U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions

ON:

Hearing “COVID-19: An Update on the Federal Response”

September 23, 2020

SUBMITTED BY:



On behalf of Argentum, we commend Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray for holding this hearing, COVID-19: An Update on the Federal Response. It is only appropriate the committee continue to provide this critical issue focused attention. The owners and operators of senior living communities have held a front row seat to this pandemic along with their employees who diligently, responsibly and compassionately serve on the front lines of this battle to care for our nations seniors, many of them veterans and their spouses. There is much to learn from this health crisis particularly as it impacts seniors. We feel it is important that attention not only focus on the challenges of COVID-19 but also recognize the very good work and outcomes occurring in communities all across this country every day to keep residents and staff safe.

Argentum is the leading national association exclusively dedicated to supporting companies operating professionally managed, resident-centered senior living communities and the older adults and families they serve. Since 1990, Argentum has advocated for choice, independence, dignity, and quality of life for all older adults. Argentum member companies operate senior living communities offering assisted living, independent living, continuing care, and memory care services. Along with its state partners, Argentum's membership represents approximately 75 percent of the professionally managed communities in the senior living industry—an industry with a national economic impact of nearly a quarter of a trillion dollars and responsible for providing over 1.6 million jobs. These numbers will continue to grow as the U.S. population ages.

We appreciate the opportunity to articulate our current, critical challenges and needs and urge your support as the senior living industry continues our efforts to combat this terrible disease and its impact on our residents and workers.

COVID-19 VACCINE APPROVAL PROCESS AND AVAILABILITY TO RESIDENTS OF SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITIES

Argentum was pleased to hear witnesses testify that they are confident that the FDA will properly assess a vaccine's safety and efficacy before granting approval.

We also noted in testimony before the Committee that any vaccine, once approved, will be rushed to healthcare workers and vulnerable populations including those with underlying conditions. We urge the Committee to ensure that residents and workers of senior living communities be included in the first distributions of the vaccine. For older adults living in senior living communities—whose average age is 85, the risk factors are high for contracting COVID-19. Many senior living community residents require assistance with activities of daily living, putting them in close contact with direct care workers, and a majority suffer from chronic conditions and comorbidities. Financial resources for these communities to assist in the administration of rapid-testing and vaccines is urgently needed.

COVID-19 TESTING FOR SENIOR LIVING RESIDENTS AND DIRECT CARE WORKERS

To combat the spread of the virus, senior living operators have taken extraordinary measures and suffered billions of dollars in financial loss. Senior living communities are not nursing homes, but we care for and protect populations with similar vulnerabilities.

We are encouraged by the recent announcement to prioritize and deliver rapid response antigen tests to assisted living communities. Though the financial losses of senior living operators continue to mount, the recent distribution for assisted living facilities in the Provider Relief Fund is also greatly appreciated. As these communities continue to sustain massive financial losses, it is important to note that they care for the same vulnerable populations as other long-term care facilities (such as skilled nursing facilities) yet have received only a fraction of federal relief.

As Congress and the Administration work toward their mutual goal of rapid-testing and vaccination to abate the pandemic in senior living communities, please know that our members are very appreciative of Congress's efforts and stand ready to provide any assistance needed. Our industry will be the cornerstone for implementing rapid testing, vaccinations and overall abating the virus in senior living communities. To be effective, however, urgent financial resources are needed. The costs of caring for those most at risk of infection cannot be overstated, and current financial losses are simply not sustainable.

SENIOR LIVING IMMEDIATE AND CRITICAL FUNDING NEEDS RELATED TO COVID-19

Based on senior living industry estimates, upfront COVID-19 related expenses related to community population needs for testing, staffing and personal protective equipment will surpass \$15 billion. To win the COVID-19 battle, senior living communities and the workforce that cares for this vulnerable population must be prioritized, and additional funding from the Provider Relief Fund or other sources is critical, particularly with the dwindling prospects of additional COVID-19 funding legislation.

To meet immediate and urgent needs, Argentum is requesting Congress and the Administration to allocate additional necessary funding to senior living providers to ensure that rapid testing, screening, and ultimately vaccinations can be effectively implemented. We also strenuously urge that additional funding is placed in the Provider Relief Fund.

CONCLUSION

The senior living industry has not escaped the tragedy that is COVID-19 but have certainly risen to the challenge. They have prepared, they continue to respond and are optimistic that better days are ahead. Compassionate and creative staff work to ensure residents are not only safe from the virus but feel secure in this uncertain time. We learn each day that examples of ingenuity and resourcefulness are not in short supply in this industry.

There are still a lot of unknowns about this virus but what we do know is that the people working on the front lines in senior living communities will be the reason the residents remain safe from COVID-19. They do their jobs against the backdrop of supply and testing shortages and worker disruptions due to childcare needs, illnesses and even fear. Employees should not be concerned about supply and testing shortages. Employers should not be concerned about the additional staffing costs required to keep residents safe in these unprecedented times. Policymakers should take action to address these shortages and when a vaccine is available, they should prioritize seniors in all care settings for access.

We thank you for your support and passage of the CARES Act and the inclusion of senior living in funding available under the Provider Relief Fund. Every senior living resident that remains virus free and out of the hospital represents a savings to the federal government through reduced Medicare spending. The costs associated with COVID-19 response cannot be overstated and the industry should be adequately recognized and allocated the necessary federal financial relief from the HHS Provider Fund for additional necessary funding to senior living providers to ensure that rapid testing, screening, and ultimately vaccinations can be effectively implemented. This battle is far from over underscoring the necessity to arm the senior living industry with the resources they need to continue their great work.

Thank you for holding this hearing and focusing on this most important topic.