

# Crisis response to COVID-19 pandemic, recovery efforts, and resiliency building for long term care facilities in Pennsylvania



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The Pennsylvania Department of Health and its partners implemented initiatives to build resiliency and capacity for COVID-19 response at long term care facilities in the state. The results have included more access to supplies, staffing, and training, as well as quality improvement projects focused on workforce development and retention, infection prevention and control, emergency preparedness, and infrastructure enhancement.

## The “What”

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted long term care residents and staff, leading to significant morbidities and mortalities. The demands on staff time to conduct infection prevention and control measures, coupled with staff sick leaves for quarantine in event of contracting the COVID-19 virus, led to the risk of staffing ratios in facilities being below adequate levels to maintain optimal resident care. Additionally, long term care systems were challenged by having inadequate levels of personal protective equipment (PPE), testing supplies, and resources to administer and process COVID-19 tests. Facilities that have a higher proportion of minority residents, are located in poorer neighborhoods, or receive more Medicaid



funding were more likely to experience COVID-19 outbreak, more likely to have a severe outbreak, and more likely to have deaths as a result of COVID-19.

In order to address these issues, the Pennsylvania Department of Health (PA DOH) and its partners used Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) funding to launch two initiatives: 1) the Long-Term Care Task Force (LTC-TF), and 2) the Long-term Care Resiliency Infrastructure Supports & Empowerment (LTC-RISE).

The LTC-TF provided emergency staffing of nurses and certified nurse assistants, and provided support with assessments and assisted with staffing long term care facilities (LTCFs) during COVID-19 outbreaks. To address the inadequate levels of PPE at LTCFs, the LTC-TF coordinated the shipments of gloves, gowns, face shields, masks, hand sanitizer, and disinfecting wipes. Also, free SARS-CoV2 testing were given to facilities upon request. Assistance was also given to staff to aid in administration of testing and sample collection, as well as support for shipment of samples and lab processing.

Among other efforts, LTC-RISE provides education to long term care providers on best practices in preventing and responding to COVID-19 outbreaks.



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## The “So What”

LTCFs were hit extremely hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. Without the staffing, PPE, and testing support provided by the LTC-TF and its partners, outcomes would have been far worse, and some facilities would have been forced to close. Overall, approximately 500 staffing requests, 850 PPE requests, and 2,300 testing supplies request were handled by the LTC-TF.

Between January 2022 and May 2023, LTC-RISE recruited 1,230 facilities (approximately 60% of all LTCFs in Pennsylvania) into quality improvement projects. LTC-RISE conducted needs assessments with LTCFs. This resulted in stronger relationships between the facilities and LTC-RISE teams, culminating in tailored quality improvement projects. These include training in infection prevention and control, cohorting techniques, fit testing, as well as

workforce empowerment projects focused on stress management, reducing burnout, and promoting job satisfaction. Surveys have shown that these quality improvement activities helped facilities in combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the analysis conducted on COVID-19 outbreak and resource needs, facilities were categorized as having high severity and low severity impact from the COVID-19 pandemic. The most vulnerable facilities were prioritized for LTC-RISE recruitment. Forty one percent (41%) of LTCFs categorized as high severity enrolled in an LTC-RISE program, while 30% of all low severity facilities were enrolled. Overall, long term care facilities enrolled in LTC-RISE had higher baseline average severity than those not enrolled. This assured that disadvantaged facilities were prioritized to receive support to mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic

## The “Now What”

Following the success of the initial projects, a Quality Investment Pilot (QIP) was developed, which is an LTC-RISE complementary initiative. QIP is allocating \$14.2 million of CDC funding directly to facilities to invest in interventions that have proven value to improve resident outcomes. These include projects on workforce development and retention, infection prevention and control, emergency preparedness, and infrastructure enhancement. The funding is open to facilities enrolled in the LTC-RISE program, with a special focus on disadvantaged facilities.

Given the end of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, LTC-RISE partners are scaling back on crisis response. They continue to offer consultative services as needed for all LTCFs across the Commonwealth, and are moving their

quality improvement work towards building resilience for all-hazards in long term care systems.

The LTC-TF is now transitioned into a permanent office at PA DOH, referred to as the Long-Term Care Transformation Office. The overarching goal of the office is to help Pennsylvania’s facilities build “resiliency” towards all future hazards.

Evaluation of the impact of these initiatives is ongoing, with comparisons to be made between facilities in the LTC-RISE QIP, versus other facilities not engaged in either resiliency initiatives. Ongoing analysis is expected to track progress and identify facilities that need more focused outreach. It is anticipated these interventions will help improve outcomes for long term care systems across Pennsylvania.

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