



Katie Smith Sloan Remarks for June 17 Telepresser: Act For Older Adults Campaign Launch

I want to start this news conference out a different way than I had planned. I just finished reading Vice President Pence's Wall Street Journal op-ed. I never thought I would live in a country in which top leaders would walk away from its oldest residents. Or would try to convince us that a life or death problem that we are coping with each day is over. That somehow their patchwork response and half-measures are -- and I quote the Vice President directly -- "a cause for celebration."

First the Administration ignored our pleas for help as the first wave of this virus hit. Then they offered a weak response to the needs of millions of residents of nursing homes, assisted living and older adult communities. Now, the VP has written an oped that a second wave is not coming -- defying health experts' predictions and what we can see before our own eyes.

We are not "winning the fight against the invisible enemy" when nursing homes are still dealing with nameless guys in parking lots to scrounge for needed PPE and buying hand sanitizer from moonshiners. The Americans we serve may be old but they know what is happening in their own lives. The covid pandemic is NOT over.

Since it began, the coronavirus crisis has been terrifying -- for all Americans and especially for older adults and the people who care for, serve, and love them. Care providers are hanging tarps to build make-shift isolation rooms. They're strapping on garbage bags instead of gowns. 80,000 people over 65 have died in just a few months. Millions more are threatened. This is a national nightmare like we've never seen.

We're here today to say that it's time for our leaders to reckon with this truth, head on and without excuses or half-measures. We must marshal the incredible resources of this country and deliver them where they are most needed.

No matter where they are--in nursing homes, assisted living communities, affordable housing, home health or other aging services settings--older adults and their caregivers face the highest risk from this pandemic. For them, this is literally a matter of life or death.

But the hard truth is that since the earliest days of the COVID crisis, federal and state policymakers have not prioritized older Americans. We now find ourselves four months into the worst pandemic in a century, but our country still has no more than a patchwork plan for protecting older lives.

For several weeks our members have been alerting us to rag-tag shipments of PPE from the federal government. Its data collection system can't yet be relied on for accurate information. And as more older Americans die and their care providers scramble to help them, our leaders repeat declarations of victory, as if words could protect against the virus.

This isn't about any single agency or program. This is about leadership. Older Americans need more than symbolic gestures, photo-ops, and guidance that come without tangible resources and hands-on help.

The federal government's responsibility is to develop a comprehensive federal plan to secure and deliver the life-saving supplies and resources that aging services providers need to keep people safe: testing, PPE, resources, and real support for care workers risking their lives every day. Aging services providers have been crying out for all of it. But their calls have gone unanswered.

Now older adults are facing a new danger: complacency.

Although the coronavirus curve has been flattened in some places, in many areas infections are spiking. Early reopenings and nationwide protests are increasing the number of people exposed to the virus. On top of all this, a second wave of COVID-19 could arrive in the coming months.

The first wave of this pandemic isn't over. And for older Americans and their caregivers, the threat to their lives is not over either.

This is no time for our leaders to step back, dust off their hands, and move on to other things. Now is the time they must stand up and act for older adults.

At LeadingAge we work with over 5,000 nonprofit aging services members around the country -- from visiting nurses and independent living communities, to nursing homes and affordable housing. We know what they need to keep their older adult clients and residents safe.

In addition to needing leadership and resources from the Administration, aging services providers are also in dire need of Congressional action.

That's why we're launching a campaign to urge Congress to act this summer to provide resources to protect older Americans from infection spikes and a coronavirus second wave.

Last week, we sent a letter to every member of Congress, calling on them to adopt a comprehensive relief package to safeguard older adults and care workers. This package, based on LeadingAge's Five Essential Actions, calls on Congress to provide a range of resources, including:

- Ample and appropriate PPE supplies
- Accurate and rapid-results testing and the funds to cover costs
- Hero pay, paid sick leave, and health care coverage for heroic frontline workers who are risking their own lives serving older people during this crisis
- And a \$100 billion-dollar dedicated emergency fund to help nursing homes and other aging services providers protect older residents and clients.

Today we're unveiling the Act For Older Adults campaign to rally Americans from all walks of life to add their voice to ours. For too many months, pleas from older adults and aging services providers have gone unanswered. Together, we can ensure Congress hears their urgent call.

Across the country, executives, care workers, residents and their families and friends are reaching out to demand that Congress enact comprehensive relief for older Americans.

Our members are holding virtual meetings with members of Congress. We've already met with 28 congressional offices -- and many more are in the works.

Advocates for aging services and family members have begun flooding their Senators' offices with phone calls and personalized messages. We've already completed over 8,000 calls and emails between citizens and their representatives -- and have more call-in plans in place.

Older adults, care workers and families will be using social media networks to share their stories, amplify their voices, and demand that Congress act. These videos, pictures and posts should serve as a reminder that Americans voting in November will most definitely be influenced by what our leaders do now to address the greatest threat older Americans have ever faced.

LeadingAge and all our advocates are maintaining social distancing throughout this campaign, but Congress will hear a virtual army banging on their doors on June 23, the National Day of Action for Older Adults.

On July 8, we and our members will join aging advocates from around the world for a global candlelight vigil remembering those who have been lost to COVID-19.

And this week, we're launching a sign-on letter to urge Congress to include robust support for aging services in its next relief package--and not to walk away from older Americans.

This pandemic isn't over. But we know where resources are needed and we know what must be done. If you believe, as I do, that older lives are not expendable -- then together we must Act for Older Adults.