



January 15, 2021

Jane Buchanan
Human Rights Watch
350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor
New York, NY 10118-3299

Dear Ms. Buchanan:

We appreciate the opportunity to share information with Human Rights Watch about the critical role of long-term care in America's health care system, and how our system can better support and improve how care is provided at nursing homes—especially in times of crisis like the current COVID-19 pandemic.

LeadingAge represents more than 5,000 nonprofit aging services providers, many of which have been deeply embedded in their communities for more than a century. Our members, including providers of skilled nursing and long-term care, and the entire field of aging and disability services, have long played a special and critical role in communities across the U.S. We represent mission-driven organizations that are guided by common values, including multiple faith-based traditions, to offer meaningful care and support so that all our neighbors can reach their potential regardless of age, race, religion, or background.

As your research acknowledges, the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented crisis for these nursing homes—and highlighted some of the long-term systemic problems in how nursing homes are staffed and funded. These new and ongoing challenges led to problems throughout the crisis, and even the most diligent of nursing homes were no match for rampant community spread. As the virus surges in the community around them, older adults and the people caring for them suffer disproportionately—and nursing home residents, who are older and have higher levels of chronic illness than the general public, are particularly vulnerable. "[Trying to protect nursing home residents without controlling community spread is a losing battle](#)," said Tamara Konetzka, a University of Chicago researcher on long-term care. But brave and dedicated workers scrambled to provide care to older Americans, at great risk to their own health and safety.

Our nation has undervalued and under-invested in older adults and their care providers for decades. The needs and very lives of older Americans are too often ignored. The result? Older adults and those who care for them suffer. In fighting the pandemic, they have been left to battle largely on their own. As one LeadingAge nursing home member explains, "We're in the fight of our lives." Without the tools to combat the virus quickly, nursing home residents faced devastating isolation while providers worked overtime to deliver quality, person-centered care while also fighting the pandemic.

LeadingAge's nursing home members have never faced such urgent challenges as they have in the past year. We implored federal leaders to immediately deliver the leadership, resources, and support needed to ensure the health and wellbeing of millions of people in long-term care. Our leaders did not listen. We are incredibly grateful that long-term care workers and older adults have finally been placed at the front of the line with hospitals for vaccine prioritization. But the tragic first 10 months of the pandemic left their destructive and deadly mark. We continue to work with members to share information and best practices, to understand their challenges,

connect them to national experts, and work with them to advocate for the support they need to fulfill their missions of quality care despite the ongoing emergency.

Since our founding in 1961, LeadingAge has stood for quality nursing home care. We've taken leadership roles in the creation of policy and regulatory initiatives (like the Nursing Home Reform Act) and efforts within our field (like Quality First and Advancing Excellence in America's Nursing Homes); and have been a partner with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services on myriad initiatives (including the [National Partnership to Improve Dementia Care in Nursing Homes](#)). Our vision is a future in which nursing homes are places any of us would be willing to live if we needed the level of care provided.

To make this vision a reality, our society and its leaders must make a commitment to bring nursing homes into the future and deliver the resources needed to back that transformation. One of many elements to this evolution is professionalizing the direct care workforce. The longstanding and systemic challenges of frontline workers have been exacerbated throughout the COVID crisis, while the value of these workers has never been clearer. Now is the time to work together on a new approach to investing in this essential workforce.

For example, research [released by the LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston in September](#) shows that wage increases for this critical workforce would actually pay for themselves and save money in the long run—benefiting workers, communities, employers, and the older adults who rely on their work. Another workforce research initiative, "[COVID-19 in Nursing Homes: Who is Leaving the Job?](#)," will help us address the direct care workers' stresses and challenges throughout COVID-19 in order to improve their workplace experience.

We thank you for your attention to the terrible impact of the pandemic on nursing homes and the millions of people they serve. LeadingAge and our members are committed to resolving the short and long-term challenges illuminated by this crisis, and we hope you will work with us to help reimagine the future for these critical care providers for older Americans and their families.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katie Smith Sloan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Katie Smith Sloan
President & CEO
LeadingAge