

**U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell**

**Senate Committee on Finance Hearing Titled: “A National Tragedy: COVID-19 in the Nation’s Nursing Homes.”**

**Witnesses: Adelina Ramos, Certified Nursing Assistant, SEIU District 1199 New England, Greenville , RI; Denise Bottcher, State Director, AARP Louisiana, Baton Rouge , LA; Quiteka Moten, MPH, CDP, State Long-Term Care Ombudsman, State of Tennessee, Nashville , TN; R. Tamara Konetzka, Ph.D., Louis Block Professor Of Public Health Sciences, Department Of Public Health Sciences, The University of Chicago, Chicago , IL; John Dicken, Director, Health Care, United States Government Accountability Office, Washington , DC; David Gifford, MD, MPH, Chief Medical Officer, American Health Care Association, Washington , DC**

**March 17, 2021**

CANTWELL: Thank you Mr. Chairman. Thank you for holding this important hearing. The state of Washington was one of the first states to record the impacts of the COVID-19 virus. And many people may remember on February 10<sup>th</sup>, the Life Care Center in Kirkland, Washington reported an outbreak of COVID-19 within the facility that ultimately would claim 46 lives. In the state of Washington, nearly half of reported deaths have been in a long-term care facilities.

That is why the American Rescue Plan included \$750 million to support nursing homes and skilled nursing facilities, including \$500 million for strike teams and \$200 million for infection control. This is something of my colleague, Senator Casey, and his leadership, as part of the COVID-19 Nursing Home Protection Act, which I also co-sponsored with him, was very important legislation. This I believe is critical. So I would like to ask Dr. Konetzka how this utilization of both strike team and staffing issues can help protect nursing home residents during these times of major outbreaks.

KONETZKA: I thank you for that question. I think the strike teams are essential. I think it's been a good tool all along for states that have decided to do that. The problem is that nursing homes, even prior to the pandemic, were often understaffed and the pandemic exacerbated that for all the reasons we've been talking about. Staff were sometimes getting sick, or afraid to bring the virus home to their families, or needed to stay home with kids who are learning online. And so you really can't implement the best practices that we now know can address a COVID outbreak, such as testing all residents as soon as there's a case in the facility, such as separating residents, and assigning dedicated staff to COVID positive versus COVID negative residents so they don't have to go back and forth between the two.

All of those things take staff and in the short run, you know we can't incentivize facilities into finding more staff and hiring them in the middle of a crisis, in the middle of an outbreak, and so the strike teams are really essential to fill those gaps. Time is essential. Once you have an outbreak, you really need to deal with it immediately and that's what the strike teams enable.

CANTWELL: Well, I think my question is -- what else can you do in coordination. I think in this case, the pandemic was new to the United States. We were at the very first impact. The Life Care Center of Kirkland was at the very first initial impact. I think the University of Washington stepped in and tried to help both in helping to identify and testing. But, it's almost at that point you need more leadership beyond just the facility itself. So what else should we be doing to consider the coordination with the strike teams of some, almost if not global, technically, but theoretically global input to help on these crises?

KONETZKA: Yeah, to me this is about policy leadership as well. I think the strike teams have mostly been facilitated through states and the strike teams need to come, of course, with some coordination and technical assistance. There needs to be state leadership to identify which nursing homes really need this help, and a coordination in getting them there, and filling the necessary gaps.

CANTWELL: Do you think we have the protocols in place now?

KONETZKA: I think it's unclear. I think there are still some things that need to be worked on in terms of overall coordination.

CANTWELL: I think you're right too. That's why I asked the question. I think we really need to think about this in the sense of protocols that need to be established because this is such a painful experience for everyone and I think knowing how we would improve upon it, and not just the strike teams, but the larger coordinated effort in marrying everything together. I think that would be great. Thank you so much. Thank you Mr. Chairman.