

More than 1,100 Wisconsin nursing home workers test positive for COVID-19, the highest weekly total of the pandemic



[Sarah Volpenhein](#) - Milwaukee Journal Sentinel



More nursing home workers tested positive for COVID-19 last week than in any other week during the pandemic, as the highly contagious omicron variant continues to surge in Wisconsin and strain health care systems.

COVID-19 cases have also risen among nursing home residents in Wisconsin, though at this point it is unclear whether hospitalizations and deaths will follow and to what degree. Most nursing home residents are fully vaccinated, but they remain one of the most vulnerable populations to serious illness from the virus.

"We're likely to see more infections, and those breakthrough infections can be quite serious," said Patrick Remington, a former epidemiologist for the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's preventive medicine residency program. "I think any place where outbreaks are likely to happen – and certainly long-term care facilities are places where that can happen – we should be concerned."

More than 80% of nursing homes in the state have had a recent COVID-19 outbreak and are under an active public health investigation, according to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

Nursing home workers who get infected generally cannot return to work during their isolation period, putting further strain on nursing homes already struggling to find workers.

[Nearly 80% of health care workers](#) in Wisconsin nursing homes have been fully vaccinated, short of the 100% target that nursing homes must achieve in the coming weeks under a federal mandate that was [upheld Thursday by the U.S. Supreme Court](#).

"When you have a highly contagious variant that's circulating in a community and you have unvaccinated workers, you have, to me, potentially a ticking time bomb," Remington said.

Statewide, about 1,123 nursing home workers tested positive from Jan. 3 to Jan. 9, the highest weekly total since the start of the pandemic and nearly double the prior week's total of 588, according to [latest figures from the CDC](#).

"We're juggling the best we can," said Emily Karls, administrator of Shorehaven, a senior living community in Oconomowoc that includes a nursing home and is experiencing an active COVID-19 outbreak.

As of Tuesday, Shorehaven was short about 30 staff members campus-wide who had either been infected by the virus or were exposed to it, Karls said. To compensate, the facility spread its remaining workers thinner and asked them to pick up more shifts.

Shorehaven is also asking visitors not to come in person if they have been exposed, Karls said. If the visit is necessary, such as in end-of-life situations, Karls said they test the visitor.

Resident cases of COVID-19 also more than doubled last week over the previous week. At least 378 nursing home residents in Wisconsin tested positive the week ending Jan. 9, more than in any week since December 2020, [according to the CDC](#).

Unlike the fall of 2020, nursing home residents have the benefit of some immunity from the vaccine. Nearly 90% of nursing home residents in Wisconsin are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus. However, studies have shown that

the vaccine becomes less effective over time and that in nursing home residents, the [loss in protection against infection was "significant,"](#) even before the omicron variant emerged.

While most nursing home residents in Wisconsin have received a booster shot to shore up their immunity, about 30% still have not gotten one, [according to the latest CDC figures.](#) That doesn't include another 10% that has not been fully vaccinated to begin with.

Ryan Westergaard, chief medical officer for the state Department of Health Services, said it's ["very important" that nursing home residents get a booster shot](#) in order to get "maximal benefit" from the vaccine.

"We've learned that with omicron, every ounce of immune system protection we can get is important," he said [during a media briefing last week.](#) "It's time to really buckle down and use all the tools we have to the best that we can now that the virus is spreading so widely."

John Sauer, president and CEO of LeadingAge Wisconsin, a statewide association of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, said it is important to "stay vigilant in our infection control practices," including masking, use of all the proper personal protective equipment around infected or potentially infected residents and frequent testing.

"We have to make sure we do what we can to keep the virus from entering our facility," he said.

Not enough staff

That's even harder to do when a nursing home is short on staff. The spike in COVID-19 cases has put further strain on the nursing home workforce, sidelining sick workers, Sauer said.

Nursing homes struggling with staffing levels have to slow or stop admissions from hospitals, ask current staff to pick up more shifts and hire temporary workers through staffing agencies, Sauer said.

At a press briefing Thursday, Gov. Tony Evers said he [would deploy the Wisconsin National Guard](#) to nursing homes and other long-term care facilities to help with staffing so that hospitals can discharge waiting patients to those facilities and free up hospital beds.

The state Department of Health Services [has contracted with staffing agencies](#) to provide temporary workers to hospitals and long-term care facilities in need of more workers, through a program that helps pay for those staff.

However, some nursing home administrators have complained that the hourly rates those staffing agencies charge are "astronomical" and difficult to pay, even with help from the state.

Understaffing can cause [nursing homes to make risky choices.](#) During the fall 2020 surge of COVID-19, some nursing homes experiencing staffing shortages allowed workers with COVID-19 to work while symptomatic or to return to work before their isolation periods were over.