

Thank you, Mr. President. I rise in support of Senate Bill 1122, and encourage an affirmative vote.

Over the past nine weeks, the people of our great Commonwealth have responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis with dignity and a fierce community spirit.

We have Stayed Home. We have practiced Social Distancing. We embraced the idea that our collective efforts could mitigate the spread of the novel coronavirus and prevent our hospital systems from being overwhelmed.

Together, we have flattened the curve and spared our hospitals — but people are still dying in Pennsylvania. Yes, Mr. President, people are still dying in this battle against COVID-19.

The most vulnerable citizens in this pandemic, Pennsylvania's nursing home residents, continue to die at alarming rates — over two-thirds of all COVID-19 deaths in Pennsylvania are residents in nursing homes. In NEPA, 75 to 80 percent of all COVID-19 deaths are in our nursing homes.

It is a tragedy of epic proportions that could have been prevented, a tragedy that must be addressed now.

Local health care professionals in our nursing homes and leading statewide nursing home advocates, like PHCA and LeadingAge PA, called on the Governor in early March to learn from the horror story of the Life Care Center in Kirkland, Washington and urged the Department of Health to prevent it from happening in Pennsylvania.

According to media reports, a nursing home response plan was developed by the Department of Health, but never implemented. Why? Why were PA nursing homes forgotten in the war against COVID-19?

Yesterday, the Governor conjured up war rhetoric and told Pennsylvanians we cannot retreat from the battlefield because we are still combating the virus.

If indeed the battle against COVID-19 is a war, there is one front that has been ignored in Pennsylvania's war plan — the defense of our most vulnerable citizens — the residents living in our long-term care facilities.

Pennsylvania nursing home residents and staff... in March, April, and into May have been left behind, forgotten, and left out of Pennsylvania's war plan against COVID-19.

The horror stories I have heard from families and nursing home staff are startling and painful to hear.

One nursing home administrator told me of the painful indignity of running out of body bags and using garbage bags to transfer the dead.

Another frontline health care worker told me of waiting weeks to get a shipment of Personal Protective Equipment from the Department of Health only to have masks and gowns tear apart and crumple to shreds because they were old and out of date.

Families have pleaded with me for answers about loved ones only to be told the Department of Health will not disclose nursing home information.

Statewide advocates, like PHCA and LeadingAge PA, have sounded the distress signal noting that operating costs for long-term care during the COVID-19 crisis has increased by over 400% for PA nursing homes.

Other states have ramped up mandatory testing, developed nursing home response teams, and were transparent in granting access to the public about the COVID-19 deaths occurring in our nursing homes.

In the battle against COVID-19, Pennsylvania Nursing homes have not been given the resources to win the war against the looming financial crisis in the nursing home industry and to stop the tragic loss of human life.

In the absence of a statewide plan from the Department of Health, the Northeastern Pennsylvania Nursing Home SOS program was established to answer the distress call from our nursing homes. The mission of the NEPA Nursing Home SOS program is simple: get nursing homes the COVID-19 safety supplies they need to protect and save the lives of nursing home residents and the staff who care for them.

I'm proud of organizations, like the Earth Conservancy and the AllOne Foundation, who spearheaded the NEPA Nursing Home SOS program with a \$500,000 donation. According to Zach Shamberg, at PHCA, there is not another public-private sector partnership like it in the state or in the country.

We understood, however, that our small local effort, while important to NEPA nursing homes, would have its greatest impact if it leveraged more state and federal resources for Pennsylvania nursing homes.

With the passage of SB 1122, the Senate answers the desperate pleas of families, staff, and residents of Pennsylvania nursing homes with over \$500 million in much needed, lifesaving, leave no nursing home resident behind, resources to protect Pennsylvania's most vulnerable citizens living in long-term care facilities.

I applaud Senator Browne, the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, for his stewardship in bringing this legislation to the Senate floor today and for garnering the necessary support of the Administration and the Department Health for this bipartisan bill that will deliver much needed resources to PA nursing homes.

It is encouraging that, despite our partisan differences, the Governor and the General Assembly can come together and work in a collaborative and united fashion to help win the war against COVID-19 in Pennsylvania nursing homes.

Mr. President, I urge an affirmative vote on SB 1122.