



ROCKLAND

7 residents dead after COVID-19 spike at Esplanade senior living community

Nancy Cutler Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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PALISADES - The Esplanade senior living community confirmed seven residents have died as COVID-19 spiked this month at the facility nestled in this woodsy hamlet.

Since Nov. 3, there have been 20 documented cases of the virus among residents. Two staff members, including a top administrator who was hospitalized, have tested positive, according to a facility spokesman and correspondence with families.

As of Monday, six residents were hospitalized with the virus; another four were in a rehabilitation facility.

The Esplanade is currently home to about 47 residents, including couples. "Most are between 85 and 95 years old and are rather frail," said Ernie Garcia of Thompson & Bender, a Westchester County-based public relations and communications firm. Many have home health aides to assist them.

The facility has about 45 staff working there.

"The most important goal at this point is to keep our residents healthy and safe," said Susan Scharf-Diamond, who owns the Esplanade with her spouse David Diamond. "We have instituted every possible safety precaution to ensure the well-being of our residents. This is our primary focus and all of our energies and efforts are being directed towards that goal."

Because the Esplanade is a private retirement community, it is not directly overseen by Rockland County Health Department or the New York State Department of Health, officials at both agencies said, and does not fall under state guidance for nursing homes or adult care facilities.

A spokesman for the county health department said officials cannot confirm the details of any positive COVID-19 test result or reported fatality due to confidentiality concerns.

"However, RCDOH continues to work with any facility or location that is identified through our case investigation process to review their policies and procedures," county spokesman John Lyon said.

The facility was amid construction and had applied to the state to open an assisted living section. Esplanade officials said construction stopped this November with the discovery of COVID-19-positive residents.

The state Department of Health could not provide details on the license application.

Timeline of spike

Esplanade officials said that the first COVID-19 case was detected Nov. 3 after a resident was sent to the hospital and tested there for the virus.

A series of communications sent by staff to residents' families showed that two residents had tested positive for the virus by Nov. 4 and residents were being quarantined in their apartments. The letter notes an uptick of cases around Rockland County.

Esplanade officials on Tuesday said both the cases were detected at the hospitals, and that voluntary testing done at the facility turned up no positives.

According to the facility, Diamond contacted the state Department of Health on Nov. 8 to inform them of the outbreak and the facility's precautions. "No concerns (were) expressed by the state," Garcia said.

Diamond then contacted Rockland County health officials on Nov. 9 to inform them of the situation.

"They have not contacted The Esplanade with any concerns," Garcia said.

On Nov. 15, COVID-19 tests from Nov. 9 showed 18 positive results.

That week, 11 residents were hospitalized and three died. The Esplanade did not

provide a timeline for the other four fatalities.

A letter from owner Scharf-Diamond on Nov. 16 stated: "We have a number of people who have tested positive and who are being monitored. I want to reassure you that we are doing our utmost to protect everyone."

Test results on Nov. 19 showed seven more positive cases. Four tests were "pending," Garcia said, and as of Tuesday, those results had not been received.

The facility planned to perform another round of testing on Wednesday.

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According to Scharf-Diamond's correspondence, the facility escaped COVID-19 cases in the spring. In June, the facility reopened to limited in-person visitations.

'Home-like atmosphere'

The Esplanade sits on 22 wooded acres off Oak Tree Road, the main stretch of road in the hamlet.

"Their vision is to provide a beautiful home-like atmosphere for their residents with every possible amenity to allow seniors to age with dignity and comfort," the organization's website states. "Their personal involvement and hands on approach imbue the Esplanade at Palisades with a warm and welcoming environment. They are raising the bar of senior living."

The retirement community boasts extensive activities, including guest lectures and various crafting sessions. Living quarters, set up like apartments, offer a range of assistance depending on need.

Construction had been ongoing at the site. The facility was in the process of applying for an assisted living license, but the state health department did not provide information about the status.

Garcia said the construction projects halted this month when COVID-19 cases were

detected.

Numbers show impact

The tiny Palisades ZIP code of 10964, with a population of 1,372, is the third smallest postal code in Rockland. The only smaller ZIP areas are Hillburn's 10931 with 1,041 residents and the 10911 postal code that covers Bear Mountain State Park with a population of zero.

In mid-September, the Palisades area registered zero cases of active virus. On Nov. 16, 44 cases were documented by the county, showing that 3.2% of the population was infected with the virus. On Tuesday, the county recorded 38 cases or 2.64% of the population.

County officials last week declined to comment specifically about the Palisades spike.

New York has run into criticism about its handling of the pandemic in congregant care, including nursing homes. Gov. Andrew Cuomo came under fire for an order that mandated a nursing home or assisted living facility could not turn away a person because of their COVID-19 status. The order, the Cuomo administration has said, stemmed from a desire to stem overcrowding in hospitals as the virus surged.

After public pressure, the state health department began releasing data on fatalities in nursing homes and assisted care facilities.

On Nov. 22, the state Department of Health listed 37 confirmed COVID-19-related fatalities at nursing homes in Rockland County and 56 nursing home fatalities presumed to be related to the virus. For assisted care facilities, the state has counted nine confirmed COVID-related fatalities in Rockland and seven fatalities presumed to be related to the virus.

The fatalities at the Esplanade would not be tallied in the state health department's data.

Nancy Cutler writes about People & Policy. Click here for her latest stories. Follow her on Twitter at @nancyrockland.