

OPINION

COMMENTARY: HOME CARE WORKERS NEED HELP

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As a 73-year-old in subsidized senior housing, I've employed a housekeeper and grocery shopper for over a year now; they help me with tasks that allow me to continue to live independently and safely.

But since COVID-19 has swept our nation, hitting our elderly population harder than any other, it's become increasingly less safe to receive this critical care. We've watched as other front line workers — from nurses to Dunkin' Donuts employees — rightfully receive PPE, hazard pay, and increased access to testing. Meanwhile, home care workers are being left in the dust.

Right now, living independently with assistance from home care workers may be the safest situation for seniors like me. COVID-19 has taken a [horrific toll in nursing homes](#) across Lynn and the country. But seniors outside of nursing homes are still at risk when home care workers aren't afforded the protections that others have earned since the pandemic struck.

Jerry, my shopper, wears a mask and gloves given to him by his employer, a multimillion dollar corporation that employs thousands of home care workers across the region. But the mask isn't an N95; it's made of paper, and he wears it all day during visits to multiple clients. While many frontline workers are rightly earning hazard pay during this pandemic, Jerry isn't earning a cent more than his usual wage — and he's underpaid as it is.

Outside of the mask, Jerry says the only additional support he's received from his employer are a plate of cookies and bottled water as a thank you.

He and I are not alone in this situation. About 45,000 home care workers are employed across the state, helping thousands of people who are elderly or who have disabilities by buying groceries, cleaning, aiding with personal care, and handling medications.

Home care workers often work in close proximity with vulnerable populations; without proper equipment, their health and our health are at risk, making their jobs much more dangerous and essential during this pandemic.

Many people have stopped visiting grandparents and other vulnerable populations in the wake of this pandemic, but home care workers still must provide essential care to seniors. There's no way for this care to go contactless; they can't work from home. And seniors can't just reschedule their visits until after the pandemic fades.

There's no question that home care workers are on the front lines of this pandemic. So why are they being forgotten?

Massachusetts families are being left with few options. My insurance only barely covers the cost of the grocery shopper and housekeeper that help me a few hours a week; I don't have other choices.

The elderly population and health care workers are already at risk due to this pandemic, and they need access to every resource to keep themselves and our community safe. If you've stopped seeing your grandparents during the pandemic to protect their safety, you should agree.

These workers need consistent, high-quality PPE, and they deserve hazard pay for putting their lives on the line to provide quality care. In-home health care companies and the state and federal government need to be held accountable. Otherwise, our healthcare system will be failing our community's elderly population and the workers who care for us.

Richard "Smitty" Smith is a Lynn resident and member of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council.