

# IN THE NEWS

News for LTC Professionals  
in 100 Words-or-Less

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## They said it

**"We certainly share in your frustration and we apologize"** Kristy Graume, director of state government relations at Minnesota's Dept of mHealth services after the state didn't file paperwork in time for LTC workers to get a December pay raise

**"I didn't mean to hurt her"** Jonathon Winch, 35, a patient charged with beating a security guard to death in the ER of a Minnesota hospital

**"I can't imagine a world in which this misinformation (from the U.S.) doesn't creep into Canadians' consciousness and leads to doubt"** Dawn Bowdish, an immunologist and professor at McMaster University in Ontario discussing vaccine rejection

## Pardoned by Trump But Locked Up in Arkansas

Joseph Schwartz, Skyline Health Care's principal operator, has reported to an Arkansas prison after a judge denied his request to delay the start of his prison sentence.

Schwartz received a one-year sentence for submitting false information that impacted the daily rate paid to his Arkansas facilities and failed to pay taxes withheld from his employees' paychecks.

In April 2025, he was sentenced to 36 months in federal prison for similar crimes but was pardoned by President Trump after serving just 90 days.

He was given credit in Arkansas for federal time served but owes Arkansas 9 more months.

KFSM-TV, 12/31/2025

## Two Dead in Pennsylvania

## Nursing Home Explosion

An explosion and fire ripped through a Pennsylvania nursing home December 22. A resident and an employee were killed.

The local gas utility, PECO, said while its crews were responding to reports of a gas odor at the nursing home, an explosion happened.

The explosion happened at the 174-bed Bristol Health and Rehab Center in Bucks County, about 20 miles outside of Philadelphia.

Fire-fighting crews first on scene called for heavy equipment to free victims believed to be trapped inside the building.

The facility was acquired by Saber Healthcare Group just 23 days before the explosion.

WATE-TV, 12/27/2025

## Investigation Centers on Gas Line In Deadly SNF Explosion

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating an explosion at a Pennsylvania nursing home that killed two people, injured 20 others and left the building uninhabitable.

The NTSB can be called in to investigate accidents that occur during the transport of natural gas, gasoline or propane through pipeline systems

Part of the Bristol Health and Rehab Center in Bucks County collapsed into the basement during the Dec. 23 catastrophe.

Two women were killed in the blast — a staffer and a resident.

McKnight's, 01/04/2026

## Police Chief's Cigarette Burned Down the SNF

A fire that burned down a Missouri nursing home last summer was caused by the cigarette of the local police chief.

Video shows Vienna Police Chief Shannon Thompson arriving at the facility just before midnight on Aug. 6 in response to an accidental 911.

After smoking a cigarette Thompson placed it in a planter near the front entrance.

About 90 minutes later, the planter caught fire and transitioned into flames that spread to the building's entrance.

No injuries were reported, but the building was a total loss.

Even though the fire was ruled accidental, Thompson could still face charges.

WTW-TV, 01/02/2026

## CMS Delays Start Of VBP Validation Audits

A new audit-like process testing the validity of nursing homes' quality data is delayed until early 2026.

CMS' Skilled Nursing Facility Data Validation Process had been set to start by September, but few audit demands had been issued before the federal government shutdown.

Initially selected facilities will begin receiving notification letters in mid-January.

Selected SNFs, up to 10% of providers annually, are required to submit medical records and documentation to support the validation on up to 10 MDS assessments.

Failure to report requested information could lead to a 2% reduction in a facility's annual payment update.

McKnight's, 12/18/2025

## Ransomware Attack Impact Upped to Almost 480K People

Covenant Health has updated the number of residents and patients in Maine and New Hampshire who were affected by a May 26 data breach, disclosing that almost 480,000 people were affected rather than the 7,864 reported in July.

The operator of skilled nursing and rehabilitation facilities; independent living, assisted living and memory care communities; community-based health and elder care organizations; and hospitals provided the revised number in a Dec. 31 letter to those potentially affected.

Senior Living, 01/07/2026

## **IN THE TRENCHES -**

### **COVID-19 & Other Outbreaks in the U.S. and the World**

**SOUTH KOREA:** A Study found that despite broad COVID vaccine availability, COVID still deadlier than flu in hospitalized patients, especially those receiving mechanical ventilation. A COVID diagnosis was associated with 76% higher odds of death within 30 days than influenza. Overall, 0.20% of patients with COVID died, compared with 0.016% of those with influenza, a roughly 12.5-fold difference in mortality (**CIDRAP**).

**AMERICA:** Nearly 8% of US health care personnel (HCP) with symptomatic COVID-19 continued to work during their illness, and the practice became increasingly common as the pandemic progressed. Among 3,721 HCP with confirmed COVID symptoms, 293 (7.9%) reported presenteeism, defined as working while sick. The researchers observed a clear upward trend in presenteeism over time, rising from 1.4% in 2020 to 15.2% in 2024 (**JAMA Network Open**).

**SEVERAL STATES:** Grass-fed ground beef that was distributed to six states is being recalled over concerns of E. coli. The USDA announced a recall on more than 2,800 pounds of raw 90/10 ground beef processed by Mountain West Food Group Idaho. The ground beef was shipped to distributors in California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Pennsylvania and Washington for further distribution to retail establishments (**The Hill**).

**SOUTH CAROLINA:** health officials said the state now has 188 cases of measles, 185 of which are associated with a growing outbreak in the Upstate region linked to elementary schools with low vaccination rates. As of late last week, 223 people were in quarantine for measles exposure (**CIDRAP**).

**ATLANTA:** The CDC announced a major overhaul, reducing recommended childhood vaccines from 17 to 11 diseases by moving shots for flu, rotavirus, hepatitis A/B, meningitis, and RSV to a "shared decision-making" category, only for high-risk kids or after provider consultation. the

move has sparked controversy, with critics fearing lower uptake (**New York Times**).

**WASHINGTON, D.C.:** Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-La.), himself a physician, who cast a critical vote to confirm Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as HHS secretary, blasted the reduction of the childhood immunization schedule by Kennedy and the CDC. The CDC announced Monday it would be reducing the number of recommended vaccines for children from 17 to 11, putting the U.S. in line with that of other developed countries like Denmark, a nation which anti-vaccine skeptics and critics often cite as a model to be emulated (**The Hill**).

**AMERICA:** This year saw at least 33 multi-state foodborne illness outbreaks for a total of 921 patients. There were likely many more sick people than were confirmed because many people do not seek medical treatment and those who do are not always tested for foodborne pathogens. The CDC estimates that for every confirmed patient in a Salmonella outbreak there are 29 who go undetected. For every confirmed patient in an E. coli outbreak there are likely more than 26 who go undetected (**Food Safety News**).

**NEW YORK:** In New York state for the week ending Dec. 27 4546 people were hospitalized with the flu. That's the highest number of flu hospitalizations recorded in a single week and a 24% increase from the previous week's 3666 hospitalizations (**ABC News**).

**AMERICA:** Flu continues to bring misery across the US, with all but four states (Montana, Vermont, South Dakota and West Virginia) showing high or very high levels of activity as a new virus strain called subclade K continues to spread. By another measure, visits to the doctor for fever plus a cough or sore throat i.e.common flu symptoms – the US is at its highest level of respiratory illness since at least the 1997-98 flu season (**CNN**).

**AMERICA:** CDC's Center for Forecasting and Outbreak Analytics estimates that COVID-19 infections are growing or likely growing in 39 states, with no states showing clear declines in transmission. Influenza cases are growing in 29 states, and RSV infections are growing, or likely growing, in 41 states (**CDC**).

**AMERICA:** The CDC estimates at least 7.5 million illnesses, 81,000 hospitalizations, and 3,100 deaths from the flu so far this season. Eight influenza-related pediatric deaths have been reported. The CDC recommends annual influenza vaccination for all persons aged 6 months and older (**MedPage Today**).

**AMERICA:** A study in JAMA Network Open, analyzed the health records of 321,743 children with regular access to care, finding that getting recommended vaccines in the first four months is the most likely sign that a child will receive the first dose of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine at 12 to 15 months. The findings underscore a growing confusion over the best time to protect very young children from serious infectious diseases (**NBC NEWS**).

**ARKANSAS** More than 500 pertussis (whooping cough) cases were reported in Arkansas this year, marking the highest annual total since the state began collecting data on pertussis 15 years ago. More than 50 counties have logged at least one case. Children and adolescents make up the majority of cases. At least 50 hospitalizations have occurred. Infants younger than 1 year account for over 60% of these hospitalizations, and one pertussis-related death was reported (**Arkansas Department of Health news release**).

**EUROPE:** COVID continues to cause hospitalizations and deaths throughout Europe, particularly among adults older than 60 and, people with chronic conditions. Vaccination remains effective at reducing the risk of severe disease and hospitalization, notes the WHO, yet uptake among high-risk groups remains low in some regions (**WHO**).

#### **COVID-19. 01/11/2026**

**World Total Cases**  
779,034,940

**World Total Deaths**  
7,107,666

**U.S. Total Deaths**  
1,232,181

## **Cost Reporting Changes Have Pay/Regulatory Implications**

Many skilled nursing providers will soon be plunged into one of the most significant data submission changes in recent memory, with cost report season getting underway for the majority of providers who close their fiscal year on Dec. 31.

New Medicare cost report forms and the data CMS derives from them are likely to affect individual providers and the entire sector for years to come.

CMS will use the new PDPM-aligned forms to capture more detail on residents' needs and services, to help the agency better forecast SNF payment rates and a potential skilled-nursing specific wage index.

*McKnight's, 12/16/2025*

## **Controlled Telemeds to Remain in Place for 2026**

For the fourth time, HHS is extending telemedicine flexibilities that allow patients to receive prescriptions for controlled medications without a prior in-person visit.

The extension runs through December 31, 2026, preventing disruptions in care while permanent rules are finalized.

"Telehealth prescribing flexibilities have become a lifeline for millions of Americans," said HHS Deputy Secretary Jim O'Neill. "Extending them ensures continuity of care while we finish the work of putting permanent, commonsense policies in place."

The telemedicine flexibilities were first introduced during the COVID-19 public health emergency and have remained in place through a series of temporary extensions.

*HHS news release, 01/02/2026*

## **Patient Charged with Murder of Hospital Guard**

A patient who allegedly fatally assaulted a security guard at a hospital north of the Twin Cities on Christmas is now charged with murder.

Jonathan Winch, 35, fled the emergency department at M Health Fairview Lakes

Hospital in Wyoming, Minnesota, after being placed on a medical hold.

Surveillance video captured him on top of the security guard, "appearing to swing and strike at" her, the complaint said.

The victim, 43-year-old Andrea Merrell, had severe head trauma and died two days later

*CBS Minnesota, 12/29/2025*

## **LeadingAge Asks to Pow-Wow With MedPAC on 5 Star**

Currently, in the Five Star system surveys are weighted most heavily in the overall rating.

In a December meeting, MedPAC Commissioners began exploring alternatives to the current star rating methodology and distribution, including options that increased the impact of the staffing and quality measures on the overall rating.

In a letter to MedPac LeadingAge noted there may be better alternatives than those discussed in the December meeting and has requested a meeting with MedPac to discuss where the organization feels the Five Star falls short.

*LeadingAge letter to MedPAV, 12/19/2025*

## **POA Accused of Stealing From Nursing Home Resident**

A South Carolina woman is charged with stealing thousands from a senior home resident.

Crystal Rochelle Walker, 46, of Seneca was charged with exploitation of a vulnerable adult and breach of trust with fraudulent intent. Walker allegedly abused her power of attorney.

Walker is accused of misappropriating approximately \$20,872.70 from the victim's funds for her own personal use.

The victim was a resident at Seneca Health and Rehabilitation, a SNF, during the time of Walker's alleged misconduct.

Walker could face up to 15 years in prison and a fine of up to \$5,000.

*WRDW/WAGT, 01/02/2026*

## **ONE COLUMN**

### **COVID-19 and Flu on The Rise in the U.S.**

Positive tests and emergency department visits have not yet gone up as dramatically as wastewater levels, but this will likely change in the coming weeks. The CDC's infectious disease forecasting center estimates that COVID-19 cases are definitively "growing" in 34 states as of December 30, and only declining in one state – California.

While both flu and COVID-19 have increased in prevalence over the last month, flu is doing more damage to the healthcare system as of late December. National flu test positivity was 33% for the week ending December 27 compared to COVID-19's 4%, and flu resulted in 8.3% of emergency department visits compared to 0.8% for COVID-19.

Here are the latest national COVID-19 trends, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and major wastewater surveillance providers:

- About 1.1 in every 100,000 people were hospitalized for COVID-19 during the week ending December 20.
- COVID-19 test positivity stayed about the same, with 3.8% of COVID-19 tests returning positive results during the week ending December 20 and 3.9% positive during the week ending December 27.
- SARS-CoV-2 concentration in wastewater increased 13% between December 20 and December 27, and the national wastewater viral activity level is "moderate," per the CDC.
- SARS-CoV-2 concentration in wastewater increased 20% between December 17 and December 24, and the national wastewater trend is "high," per WastewaterSCAN.
- Healthcare visits for influenza-like illness increased 37% between the week ending December 20 and the week ending December 27, and this metric is at a record high compared to prior flu seasons.

*The Sick Times, 01/06/2026*

## KY Top Court Rejects Provider COVID Immunity

The Kentucky Supreme Court has revived a four-year-old lawsuit alleging Mayfield Health and Rehabilitation was negligent in Emma Hayes', a resident, COVID-19 death\ in December 2020, barely a week before the first vaccines became available.

The court found that the state's Court of Appeals erred in previously dismissing the case against the nursing home.

Hayes' family had argued that the nursing home was negligent in her death, and Mayfield's attorneys moved to have the case dismissed given that the COVID shield required plaintiffs to prove "gross negligence" to move a case forward.

*McKnight's*, 12/23/2025

## Attorney: PE, REITs Drive Decline in SNF Quality

Private equity and real estate investment trusts are the main financing vehicles in long-term care, and their presence, ultimately, has hurt quality of care.

Elder abuse litigation attorney Ed Dudensing at an end-of-year webinar said private equity and REIT ownership of nursing homes has grown exponentially to reach 13% in 2025.

Dudensing said PE is associated with a 10% increase in the short-term mortality rates of Medicare patients, increased ED visits, increased hospitalizations and increased government spending.

Further, he noted, PE-owned LTC facilities had a 12% decline in registered nursing hours and a 14% increase in deficiency scores after acquisition.

*Senior Living*, 12/16/2025

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WRDW/WAGT, 01/02/2026

## Escanaba Siblings Open New Assisted Living Home

A team of siblings will open a new assisted living center soon in Escanaba in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Family Crest Living has 12 beds and 9 rooms, from suites to studios.

Co-partner Kristy Dumas said it's an all-inclusive facility, with no extra expenses. She said she and her brothers are 4th-generation caregivers.

Dumas said they hope to help people with neurological diseases like dementia and support their families.

The siblings say the facility is close to final inspections and will hopefully open in mid-January.

WLUC-TV, 01/03/2026

## Three Million Bucks For Itchy Eyes

Medicare overpaid just 15 optometrists serving nursing home residents an estimated \$3 million over three years for low-level services billed with more intensive, higher-cost codes.

The HHS-OIG reported those practitioners routinely used high-value evaluation and management codes when treating residents, even though the most common complaints connected to their Part B claims were merely dry or itchy eyes.

It said it would also instruct its contractors to notify optometrists to conduct their own internal audits, identify similar overpayments and return them. But CMS will not conduct claim audits because the number of optometrists accused of overbilling was so small.

WTWY-TV, 01/02/2026

## Briefly in the News

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has announced a net savings of 44%, or \$12 billion, from last year's negotiated Medicare spending on 15 drugs used widely to treat cancer and other serious chronic conditions. The 15 drugs in this second negotiation cycle, used to treat cancer, diabetes, asthma, and other chronic illnesses, represent some of the highest Medicare Part D spending (*CMS*).

A study published in the European Heart Journal could help predict the likelihood of dementia up to 25 years in advance. The research found a link between increased levels of cardiac troponin, a protein found in the heart that is released into the bloodstream when the organ is damaged, and more rapid cognitive decline in later years (*The Hill*).

Two types of scans indicated that obese participants in a study had a 29% to 95% faster rate of increase in plasma pTau217 ratio levels, a biomarker used in the diagnosis and monitoring of Alzheimer's disease. Additionally, baseline obesity led to a 24% faster rate of increase in plasma neurofilament light chain (NfL), a protein fragment released from damaged or dying neurons, and a 3.7% faster rate of increase in amyloid accumulation (*McKnight's Daily Clinical*).

Two reports from the American Physical Therapy Association claim that even as the median salary for full-time physical therapists working in geriatrics hit the \$100,000 mark, pay increases failed to keep up with inflation. The survey also showed that few skilled nursing therapists hold the kinds of post-professional credentials that can increase salaries – less than 21% were board certified (*McKnight's*).

Mysterious hand bruises, severely swollen ankles, and nodding off while seated -- these are just a few of the instances that prompted questions about President Trump's health last year. Docs say don't sweat it. That's normal for a guy who will be 80 this year. Trump had medical tests at Walter Reed as well as his second Montreal Cognitive Assessment on which he once again scored 30/30 (*MedPage Today*).