

## **Unprepared and overwhelmed: NJ's Health Department has no easy answers for long-term care crisis**

[Dustin Racioppi](#), Trenton Bureau Published 5:01 a.m. ET May 18, 2020

Andover Rehabilitation and Subacute Care nursing home, which was "overwhelmed" with bodies amid a COVID-19 outbreak, seen from the air on April 16, 2020. NorthJersey.com

**CONNECT** [TWEET](#) [LINKEDIN](#) [COMMENT](#) [EMAIL](#) [MORE](#)

A failure to heed warnings about long-term care facilities — combined with testing and protective gear that was prioritized for hospitals — left New Jersey's Department of Health "absolutely not prepared" for the COVID-19 outbreak at homes that care for the state's most vulnerable residents, say state health officials, advocates and lawmakers.

The response to the viral disease at long-term care homes has come under scrutiny as those facilities have accounted for more than half of New Jersey's coronavirus-related deaths.

And a move by Gov. Phil Murphy's administration to hire consultants to review the response has frustrated Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli, whose office is charged with regulating long-term care operations throughout the state, said two Health Department officials with direct knowledge of her conversations on the matter.

Persichilli complained about the move, telling several Health Department officials that "I never have the governor's attention," according to an audio recording reviewed by the Trenton Bureau of the USA TODAY Atlantic Group, a consortium of 37 newspapers in the Northeast. "I have never had a one-on-one with him."



**New Jersey Department of Health Commissioner Judy Persichilli speaks during Governor Phil Murphy's Friday, May 8, 2020, press conference at War Memorial in Trenton, NJ, on the State's response to the coronavirus. (Photo: Thomas P. Costello)**

Persichilli has been a highly visible presence in the governor's daily briefings, participates with him in weekly video calls with the White House and is in constant communications with his top aides. She drew strong praise from Murphy this past week.

"You have no idea, folks, what it is like walking in the shoes of Judy Persichilli," Murphy said at his daily briefing on Thursday. "No one has done more over the past three months in this state — and, I would argue, in this country — as a health matter, as a leadership matter. She has been absolutely extraordinary with literally the weight of the lives of 9 million people on her shoulders morning, noon and night."

Nationally, nursing homes and other long-term care facilities have been decimated by the virus. In New Jersey, those homes are linked to more than half the state's COVID-related deaths, which lead the country when adjusted for population.

As a result, a legislative committee plans to hold hearings into the state's preparedness and response. And the Republican State Committee is calling for a federal investigation into how Murphy's administration handled the virus.

A review of transcripts and recordings, as well as interviews with the two public health officials involved in the coronavirus response, shows an understaffed and overwhelmed Health Department grappling with a pandemic linked to deaths that are orders of magnitude greater than the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001.

There were no easy answers.