

Over the course of four months, Capital Main produced a series of stories on the lethal spread of COVID-19 in nursing homes across Los Angeles county. The stories exposed the negligence of public health officials in combating the pandemic as it sickened and killed thousands of residents in skilled nursing facilities.

The Los Angeles County department of Public Health is the only public health agency in California with direct authority over conditions at nursing homes. It receives tens of millions of dollars from the state to inspect these facilities and enforce standards designed to ensure the health of its mostly elderly, frail residents. And yet, by April of 2020, nearly half of all COVID-10 deaths in L.A. county were among nursing home residents — a percentage significantly higher than the national share of COVID-19 fatalities in nursing homes.

Through a detailed reconstruction of key events, Capital & Main showed how the county left nursing home residents vulnerable through a lack of adequate testing, personal protective equipment and other disease control efforts. The reporting also demonstrated how the county's public health department put out false or misleading information about its response to COVID-19 in skilled nursing facilities.

Capital & Main's initial investigation was followed by subsequent coverage on the transfer of COVID-19 patients to nursing homes. This reporting revealed the inadequate safeguards put in place to limit further spread of the virus among some of the most vulnerable Angelenos. Capital & Main also published stories on the shortcomings of an inspector general process that was triggered by the widespread loss of life in county nursing homes.

Capital & Main's reporting was widely circulated within the county's public health department. In the months following our coverage, the percentage of COVID-19 deaths among nursing home residents fell significantly.

Capital & Main's investigation of COVID-19 and L.A. County public health officials focused significantly on the leadership of public health director Barbara Ferrer. A ubiquitous presence in the media, Ferrer received almost no critical coverage until Capital & Main began examining her agency's performance with regard to nursing homes and the pandemic. This coverage provided crucial scrutiny of the director of one of the nation's largest public health agencies. Capital & Main's reporting has raised fundamental questions about Ferrer's decisions and leadership style.

In the weeks and months following Capital & Main's reporting, Ferrer — who had been virtually the sole spokesperson for her department in the early months of the pandemic, despite not being a medical doctor — began allowing others within public health to speak publicly about the pandemic. This included the county's chief medical officer.

Capital & Main also reported on the division within L.A. County's public health department responsible for oversight of nursing homes. Through a combination of interviews and documents, this coverage exposed deep-seated dysfunction within the division.

Taken together, Capital & Main's coverage represents the most significant effort by any media organization to tell the story of how one of the nation's largest public health agencies failed to protect nursing homes residents in the crucial early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.