

Today I am here to talk about a subject that is often overlooked during this pandemic. The coronavirus nursing home tragedy that took the lives of thousands of seniors including my husband's parents.

Mickey and Dee Newman were married for 59 years and raised 3 children: Donna, Michael and Sean.

They lived in the same four-story walk-up apartment in Brooklyn for almost six decades.

Mickey was in the U.S. Air Force before he met Dee and always talked about how proud he was of his service.

He joined the Fire Department of the City of New York and served for 23 years in Engine Company 323 in Brooklyn.

Dee was a homemaker and worked part-time in a dentist office in the neighborhood for close to 20 years. She was a devoted mother and grandmother.

With their health declining over the last few years, Mickey and Dee were both having a tough time getting up and down the stairs.

We tried many times to persuade them to move to another place with easier access but they lived in a rent-controlled building and it was hard to convince them to give that up.

We had personal aides come to the apartment, but their health continued to decline. It was apparent that their top floor apartment was no longer an option.

We started looking into assisted living.

With Mickey's medical conditions and his dementia, it was hard to find a facility close enough, but we were directed to one that agreed to take both parents. Dee was able to move in just before Christmas last year but Mickey was still not well enough. He needed rehab and was in a nursing home.

We prayed that one day Mickey would be well enough to join his wife. This was the first time in their lives they had been apart like this.

And then came COVID-19.

Mickey's nursing home went into quarantine in mid-March. We could no longer visit.

Shortly after the visitor lockdown, someone called to let us know Mickey was being switched to another floor so that the one he was being moved from could be dedicated to new patients.

From what I know now, I believe some of those new patients were ones recovering from COVID -- thanks to a statewide mandate from Governor Andrew Cuomo.

On March 29, Sean got a call in the late morning and was told that his dad wasn't doing well. This was the first time we had heard he was

sick. He had a fever and his breathing was labored. Three hours later a doctor called to tell us his dad was dead.

The doctor said it was likely as a result of the coronavirus. We only got confirmation when we saw it on his death certificate.

Sean had to break the news to his mom that her husband had died. It was the hardest thing he's ever done.

My husband saw his mom only once after that.

Sean brought her orchids, condolence cards, and a few pictures of Mickey, but he couldn't pass the front desk.

My husband saw his mom in the lobby, standing ten feet away with a mask on, and told her he loved her. She started to cry before he left.

He would never see her again.

Before she died, Dee had mentioned that some workers were sick. She also said residents, were still going outside for newspapers and coffees -- without masks on.

As family members, we were prohibited to come to see Dee for risk of bringing in the virus. But why were the people who lived there coming and going? We've asked those questions and were told that they could not deny residents, of going outside as they pleased – even during a pandemic.

A few days later Dee's health went downhill. She was moved to the hospital.

Sean talked to his mom the morning before nurses moved her to a different area in the hospital. We knew that was not a good sign.

She needed more oxygen and her throat was hurting. She had a cough and a fever.

During Sean's last conversation with Dee, the last thing she asked him to do was get some Easter gifts for the kids. She asked him, could he put her name on the presents?

A nurse called us the next day to tell us she was in and out of consciousness. They gave her more oxygen.

A day later, she died.

Even though she contracted the virus in an assisted living center, her death was not counted that way -- because she died in a hospital.

Apparently, New York is the only state that doesn't count the number of deaths in the hospital from patients that got the coronavirus while in elder care facilities. We still do not have the exact numbers even though the governor and his health commissioner have been asked repeatedly to report them.

Our grief and confusion turned to anger as we learned more about how elder care homes were turned into death traps.

Our most vulnerable loved ones could not protect themselves.

Thousands of family members lost loved ones. Many who would still be here today if they were better protected at a time when they were most vulnerable.

Today, I want to lend my voice to those thousands that have lost their parents and grandparents.

We need to learn from this tragedy to make sure it never happens again.

I believe there needs to be a full bi-partisan outside investigation with subpoena power. We need honest answers about why there was an order to put over 6,000 COVID positive patients into nursing homes for 46 days and why there didn't need to be a test for incoming patients prior to admission or readmission.

Our governor Mr. Cuomo has rejected repeated calls for an independent investigation saying that doing this would be political. If has nothing to hide, why wouldn't he welcome any and all investigations with regards to the nursing home tragedy?

The death toll in our senior living facilities in New York alone is bigger than September 11th and Hurricane Katrina combined.

This should not be about politics. It's about accountability for what happened to our parents and our grandparents who trusted us to look out for them. Thank you.

