

**In this Industry Update you will discover:**

1. *“No Time to be Afraid’: Providers Recall Early Months of Pandemic, Resilience of Sector”*  
- **MCKNIGHT’S SENIOR LIVING NEWS, 10/9/2020; pg. 1**
2. *“Unified Industry Voice Faces COVID-19 Challenges to Support Older Adults”*  
- **MCKNIGHT’S SENIOR LIVING NEWS, 10/9/2020; pg. 2**
3. *“Meeting the Needs of Older Adults Means Focusing on the Middle, Say Industry Experts”*  
- **MCKNIGHT’S SENIOR LIVING NEWS, 10/9/2020; pg. 4**
4. *“Senior Living Providers Get Creative to Improve Workforce Retention amid Pandemic”*  
- **SENIOR HOUSING NEWS, 10/5/2020; pg. 6**

**‘No Time to be Afraid’: Providers Recall Early Months of Pandemic, Resilience of Sector**

Written by: Danielle Brown

10/9/2020

The resilience, work ethic and sacrifice made by providers and staff during the current public health crisis were honored by the American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living on Thursday as it kicked off its 71st Annual Convention and Expo.

“We’re going to use this as a time to really celebrate and honor the incredible work that you and your teams have done in your buildings, especially for the last seven months,” AHCA/NCAL president and CEO Mark Parkinson said during the virtual opening general session.

“In early 2020, we were bracing for the impact of COVID, but in retrospect we had no idea what we were in for,” noted Robin Dale, president and CEO of the Washington Health Care Association.

The [first recognized U.S. outbreak of COVID-19](#) occurred at a Washington state SNF in late February. Dale noted that by the end of that first week, four nursing homes were impacted and by the end of March, 50% of SNFs and 25% of assisted living facilities were dealing with coronavirus. He explained that the first two months of the crisis “was a blur for us” with long work hours and few, if any, days off.

“But we did this knowing that our members and our frontline workers were working so much harder than we were. In those early days, they were going into those buildings and they were fighting what was essentially an unknown killer, while at the same time try to mentally and emotionally process the number of residents that they were losing and so quickly,” Dale said.

“It was particularly devastating for our frontline workers but there was no time to be afraid. There wasn’t time to be in shock. I literally saw our members and workers roll up their sleeves and just get to work. For the last seven months, that’s what they’ve been doing,” he added.

Since then, Dale said residents, family members and surrounding communities have all come together to support each other and fight COVID-19.

“I’ve been in this sector for nearly 30 years. I’ve never experienced a more harrowing time, but I’ve never been prouder to be associated with this sector and to know the members and the workers,” he said.

Parkinson said telling such stories is important and thanked Washington caregivers in particular for having “shown incredible love and compassion.”

Dale’s comments were followed by a moment of silence for all those in long-term care who have died from the disease.

“Since March, we have been victims of a virus that we just couldn’t control and that’s because its spread through asymptomatic carriers which is completely different from viruses that we’ve faced in the past,” Parkinson noted.

“You and your teams did not give up,” despite not having adequate supplies of personal protective equipment and access to testing, he said while praising session attendees for their “amazing resiliency.”



## Unified Industry Voice Faces COVID-19 Challenges to Support Older Adults

Written by: Kimberly Bonvissuto

10/9/2020

Crisis causes focus. And during the COVID-19 crisis, top senior living industry leaders have combined efforts to amplify their voices and work toward a common goal of supporting older Americans.

Those industry leaders literally came together Thursday — online — during the 2020 National Investment Center for Seniors Housing & Care Fall Conference to share their stories of advocacy and impact

“There have been some strong steps forward,” said NIC President and CEO Brian Jurutka. “There seems to have been and continues to be an unprecedented level of cooperation between the organizations during the pandemic.”

But they concede there is still much to be done.

### **Regaining trust**

David Schless, president of the American Senior Housing Association, said ASHA used its consumer-facing website and social media platform “Where You Live Matters” to respond to some of the inaccurate and negative stories in the news and “set the record straight” on what was actually going on in senior living communities.

“By early summer, consumer sentiment improved markedly,” Schless said. “It is a concerted, ongoing effort.”

ASHA is about to start a second phase of the campaign to target prospective residents and their families through testimonials from family members, residents and staff members to build confidence and trust in the product.

“The onus is on us to rebuild trust and to restore confidence in our services and settings,” said LeadingAge President and CEO Katie Smith Sloan. “It’s going to take time. It’s going to take a lot of communication to get us to that point. From a consumer perspective, we’re not in a good place. We’ve got work to do.”

Early on, the major trade associations collaborated informally to identify member priority and move in the same direction.

“We ultimately got into a groove,” said Argentum President and CEO James Balda. “The organizations all identified, as our members were telling us, the priorities were really around PPE, testing, financial relief, liability protections. That ultimately evolved into the need for us to collaborate on vaccines and vaccine administration.”

Balda said industry leaders “were saying essentially the same things to the same people, oftentimes together,” in the form of political action committee calls, joint letters and an industry task force focused on liability protections. That, he said, resulted in testing kits delivered to communities, liability protections at the state level and financial relief funding from the federal government.

## **Beyond COVID**

He sees that unified collaboration continuing in the post-COVID environment.

“As we emerge from this crisis, there’s going to be a real increased focus on our industry from federal and state policymakers, and it’s going to be critical for all of us to work together to make sure that we’re able to support a strong state regulatory framework and meet the needs of our members going forward,” Balda said.

Sloan said that while each association represents a slightly different slice of the aging services field, there are many areas where they overlap.

“What we’ve learned is there’s a new issue every day, and the old issues never go away, and we continue to work on them,” she said, adding that it’s been a lot of “blocking and tackling.” “It’s simply what’s required in a crisis like this pandemic.”

Scott Tittle, executive director of the National Center for Assisted Living, likened the battle against COVID-19 to a war on multiple fronts, including fighting the virus itself and mitigating it once it’s in, the financial battle to prevent the virus from getting into buildings, the public relations battle, and the liability battle.

“There was an education effort that was very collaborative from all of us and others to educate the Hill and the White House on the healthcare components that are involved in senior living,” Tittle said. “We need to continue to educate the Hill and members of the press and some of our future clients to understand there were good faith

efforts undertaken in buildings to help save people’s lives with no PPE, no access to testing, a vaccine has not been developed, and funding has been slow to come.”

Tittle said liability issues will significantly impact the senior living business model in the future. He said even before COVID-19, the market was hard with significant exclusions for some infections, fewer carriers offering policies to long-term carriers, and deductibles and premium increases that will create a significant financial strain on operators.



## Meeting the Needs of Older Adults Means Focusing on the Middle, Say Industry Experts

Written by: Kimberly Bonvissuto

10/9/2020

Economic pressures placed on middle-income adults during the COVID-19 pandemic has created a growing population of seniors with housing needs but limited resources.

Senior housing providers recognize the challenges of this growing demographic and see an opportunity to provide creative ways to meet their needs in cost-effective ways.

John Cochrane, president and CEO of HumanGood, a Pleasanton, CA-based nonprofit senior housing provider, said the economic disruption caused to the middle market means the industry will need to work more collaboratively, think differently about healthcare and be open to new partnerships to provide needed services.

“The pandemic had an immediate influence deeply felt across our company and the field,” said Cochrane, who was part of a panel Thursday at the 2020 National Investment Center for Seniors Housing & Care (NIC) Fall Conference on “Seniors housing’s new reality: Impacts and ideas for the forgotten middle.”

“The middle market is aware of their own economic circumstances. They are increasingly aware of their own health and wellness circumstances. They are looking for resources to manage that,” Cochrane said. He added that the industry needs to find new ways of delivering early holistic value in healthcare to help seniors live their best lives, live independently and not be a draw on society.

Another panelist, James Lydiard, staff vice president of CareMore Health, a California-based integrated health plan and care delivery company, said housing and healthcare are no longer separate sectors when serving older adults.

“You need both,” Lydiard said. “Start to think about assisted living and independent living settings as much as

healthcare settings as you think about nursing homes and hospitals. We’re not there yet, but these are discussions we need to start having now.”

Lydiard said healthcare partners can be a function of community operations. Ideally, he said, operators should work with fewer, more intimate partners to achieve an operational and productivity impact in their communities.

Narrowing the number of providers and the number of options, he said, will make patient's lives better, building operations will run smoother, and partner companies can bring more robust solutions to a building or community.

Cochrane said providers need to look at unbundling services like the cable companies and be willing to let go of those services that can be better delivered through a service partnership.

Healthcare, he added, is one of those areas.

"I think we are one-size-fits-all healthcare. We're trying to serve everybody and we're kind of an acquaintance of a lot of people, but we're not developing deep relationships, nor are we getting deep impactful results for the people we're trying to serve," Cochrane said. "We can better serve with partners who understand those populations, and have the resources to address their needs in a really comprehensive way. We can benefit from that."

The third panelist, Bill Pettit, president of Seattle-based R.D. Merrill Co., the parent company of Merrill Gardens and sister company Pillar Properties, said R.D. Merrill is exploring that unbundling and multiple partnership model by working with local home healthcare companies to identify a principal vendor to deliver better efficiency.

By partnering on the care side, and with more novel, custom solutions on the dietary side, Pettit said he'll be able to operate buildings and charge rents that are \$1,000 to \$2,000 less per month than the full-service senior housing model.

After realizing it was losing its middle-income seniors over the last 10 to 15 years due to cost increases in operations and construction, R.D. Merrill partnered last fall with Toledo, OH-based ReNew REIT, a healthcare real estate investment trust, [to buy a portfolio of senior housing buildings](#) at an "attractive valuation" to serve seniors out of a less expensive physical plant.

R.D. Merrill plans to turn those 35 communities into a new Merrill brand to still deliver many of the benefits of lifestyle enhancements in senior living, but focused on a way to do it with less staff and lower cost.

"More affluent seniors make decisions in different ways than middle income seniors, who are far more open to participating in their own needs as seniors and facilitating that in different ways," Pettit said. "We think seniors in the middle income are far more cognizant of their resources and willing to make decisions based on those resources differently than more affluent seniors."

Pettit said the biggest impediment the industry has to the middle market is the conviction that the full-service senior housing community is the only solution.

"There are other solutions. We're crafting one," Pettit said. "Our biggest impediment is ourselves."

**(New article on next page)**

# Senior Living Providers Get Creative to Improve Workforce Retention amid Pandemic

Written by: Tim Regan

10/5/2020

The Covid-19 pandemic has injected new stress and fear into senior living workers' lives, and this has prompted some providers to implement new strategies in order to retain them.

Flexible scheduling, higher pay, free meals and other services were not standard fare in the senior living industry before the pandemic, but providers now wield these tools with greater frequency as they seek to stay ahead of staffing shortages. Much of that has to do with the fact that senior living employees are experiencing far more mental stress than they were just seven months ago, according to Lisa Fordyce, an executive vice president at OnShift.

"Employee retention is going down because of the high-risk work environment and the pay associated with it," Fordyce told Senior Housing News, referring to what OnShift's customer success team hears from the providers it serves. OnShift is a Cleveland-based firm that provides senior living workforce software and services. The company recently shared with Senior Housing News some preliminary data from its to-be-released 2020 Workforce 360 report.

But for some providers, higher turnover is not a predetermined outcome. For example, at Summit Vista, a life plan community in Taylorsville, Utah, turnover and retention have not been a big challenge — even as the state in July [reported the lowest unemployment rate in the country at 4.5%](#).

The life plan community implemented new staffing strategies at the outset of the pandemic, and has held morale-boosting events for employees in the months since. These changes, including a dramatic shift in how workers are scheduled, has helped the company retain the workers it has, according to Tineka Hardwick, Summit Vista's director of human resources.

"It's our culture," she told SHN. "Our culture starts with our leadership ... and how we make employees feel. We're like a family here."

Culture is also what helps keep employees coming to work at Caledonia Senior Living, the North Riverside, Illinois-based senior living arm of non-profit organization Chicago Scots. Since the pandemic began, the organization has focused not only on developing its culture from within, but also on bringing people in that are compatible with that culture.

"Culture is huge, and hiring right," Caledonia Senior Living CEO Gus Noble told SHN. "There is a calling [in senior care], and if we can hire people that hear that calling, we're doing something right."

## Turnover still a top challenge

Employee turnover was the No. 1 hurdle for senior living providers last year, with 72% of providers listing it as the top workforce challenge in OnShift's 2019 Workforce 360 Report. But with the Covid-19 pandemic at hand in 2020, senior living providers found that finding and hiring qualified job candidates became the No. 1 challenge, and employee turnover fell to the No. 2 spot at 57%, according to preliminary findings from this year's still-unreleased report.

Other data also support the notion that turnover remains a primary concern for senior living providers. For instance, there has been a notable increase in the number of providers that are relying on temporary labor to fill staffing shortages, according to results of the Executive Insights Survey from the National Investment Center for Seniors Housing & Care (NIC).

About 35% of respondents reported using agency or temp workers when NIC conducted this survey relatively early in the pandemic, but that [number rose](#) to 57% in the latest round of the survey, which occurred between Sept. 15 and Sept. 27.

In the last seven months, the pressures that have motivated senior living employees to find new jobs have changed. With the pandemic in full swing, employees are now more focused on staying safe, and on getting enough time off if they become sick. That has prompted some operators to retool their employee assistance programs (EAP) and remind employees that these programs exist.

“Employers are changing and adapting to the pandemic, and in how they’re handling their retention efforts,” Fordyce said.

While burnout was a real risk before the novel coronavirus, it is now an even greater one. OnShift has tracked a 50% increase in call-offs and a 12% increase in overtime hours for employees, according to data collected from its employee scheduling software.

“There’s some mental wear and tear that goes along with this,” Fordyce said. “As caregivers, we’re compassionate, we care and we show up even when we’re exhausted and tired.”

To get ahead of those pressures, OnShift has noted a variety of strategies providers can utilize. They range from free childcare, flexible spending and free meals to an increase in base pay, extra uniforms, transportation services and mental health benefits. Fordyce also noted a senior living operator that started employing chaplains in order to keep employees engaged spiritually.

Communication is also vitally important — and that’s a two-way street. Senior living companies should be prepared not only to talk to employees, but listen to them.

OnShift tracked a 28% increase in messages sent through its employee scheduling software in the first few months of the pandemic, with main topics of communication including paid time off and sick leave, PPE, regulatory updates and safety practices.

“They may have ideas and innovations on how to support residents and their colleagues,” Fordyce said. “It gives the employee confidence that their employer is looking out for their safety, that they are looking out for their wellbeing.”

In addition to focusing their efforts on younger workers, providers would also do well to implement strategies that help retain their workers who are older than 50, according to Cate O’Brien, assistant vice president and director at Mather Institute, the research arm of Evanston, Illinois-based senior living nonprofit Mather.

“Even in the context of a pandemic, there is still a worker shortage, and a real need to focus on keeping people, certainly in the health care industry,” O’Brien told SHN.

Older workers are likely to want many of the same things as younger workers. But two strategies that may appeal to them specifically are flexible work schedules and programs that foster physical and intellectual wellness, according to a pre-Covid workforce survey from Mather Institute. The survey analyzed responses from 232 employees who are at least 50 years old and working at nine senior living communities.

According to the survey, the most common and likely reason workers over 50 leave their jobs is to pursue other priorities or interests, such as hobbies, time with family and friends, or further education. So, O'Brien suggests that providers take stock of their flexible or part-time scheduling options as well as their wellness programs for areas where they can improve.

The study also found that workers who felt their workplace was a positive environment for people of all ages reported higher job satisfaction, made them less likely to want to leave their employer and reduced their feelings of burnout.

"This is something that maybe [providers] hadn't thought about before," O'Brien said. "But our study suggested it's worth taking a look at, and to consider how they might promote that kind of environment."

## Strategies for retention

At Summit Vista, turnover peaked just before the Covid-19 pandemic kicked into high gear in March. But the community has not had to struggle with turnover during the pandemic as some others in the senior living industry have, according to Hardwick. The community's average turnover rate is currently 23.6%, well below its target of 35%.

That is perhaps not surprising for Summit Vista, which [ranked no. 20 among small- and medium-sized providers](#) on the Best Workplaces for Aging Services list in 2019. All the same, the low turnover rate exemplifies the provider's success in dealing with employee retention.

When Covid-19 hit, the life plan community adopted a two-tiered schedule that helped with turnover. The community sent home all of its staff who could work remotely, separated its essential workforce into two teams and boosted their pay.

"We had 'A' and 'B' teams, and they worked seven days on, seven days off," Hardwick said. "And in those seven days on, they worked 65 hours but they were paid for 80."

The schedule gave employees the confidence that, if they or a loved one got sick, there would be time to stay at home. It also gave employees 15 hours of extra pay for their hard work during a scary time. While Summit Vista's caregiving workforce has since returned to their pre-Covid staffing schedules, the community's back-of-the-house employees liked the change so much that it's their new normal, Hardwick added.

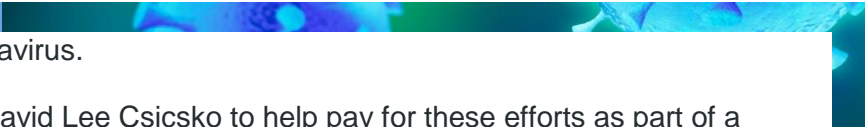
Summit Vista also worked to adapt some of its pre-Covid practices, like holding a summertime party for employees and their families. Instead of hosting a big party this year, the community hired a beloved local food truck called Waffle Love to sling treats for employees and residents who enjoyed it outdoors while socially distancing.

"They could order whatever they wanted from the truck," Hardwick said. "It helped the residents, along with the employees, feel like we weren't in the middle of a pandemic."

Meanwhile, near Chicago, Caledonia was taking a similar approach to retaining workers. In addition to relying on its strong culture — like a tree relies on its deep roots to keep it from blowing away in a thunderstorm, Noble said — the organization has also implemented creative benefits for workers.

Contributions from generous donors have allowed Caledonia to buy its workers meals such as pizza, burgers or Chinese food. The organization also gives employees a bag of groceries every week, a practice it's kept up for the past six months. Not only does that practice boost morale, it also helps employees avoid public places where





they risk coming into contact with the novel coronavirus.

The organization linked up with renowned artist David Lee Csicsko to help pay for these efforts as part of a Scottish-themed [fundraiser campaign called “Heroes for Heroes.”](#)

“We sell T-shirts, and coffee mugs, umbrellas ... that raise money to support the groceries, and the bonuses, and also to buy PPE and pay for testing,” Noble said. “If we’re asking for [employees] to make a commitment to show up to work and take care of themselves outside of work ... then we have to make commitments to them that they recognize and appreciate.”