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Senior Living can Emerge from Pandemic Stronger

The Senior Living industry has encountered many obstacles in the past few months because of the coronavirus outbreak, but the rewards for dealing with the pandemic in a reasonable fashion shows that there is opportunity to become a more resilient option for senior healthcare.

Written by: Danielle Brown

8/17/2020

Senior living communities scrambled to respond to the COVID-19 virus that was tragically hitting areas around the country, especially affecting older adults with associated health problems. Because the residents living in assisted living have an average age of 86 years and four chronic conditions, it was like watching a freight train bearing down toward residents and staff.

Many senior housing operators took the early reports seriously and quickly began to adjust their best practices in everything from infection control to sourcing medical supplies to how to assess and move in new residents.

Leadership was essential in keeping communities operating at a level of stability and quality, even while the virus affected many residents and staff. And leadership wasn't demonstrated just by people in the top positions; staff members at all levels stepped forward to fill the void where needed, working to keep residents safe and engaged.

Assessing, maintaining, supporting good health a necessity

The outbreak of viruses in assisted living is not new, of course. One of the best-prepared operators pulled her manual off the shelf from last year's rotavirus infection that had affected many residents and staff. Managing a respiratory versus a gastrointestinal outbreak has many similarities in best practices, and her assisted living community displayed a nimbleness that allowed her to rapidly respond while tightening her infection control protocols and staying COVID infection-free.

In fact, residents move into our assisted living communities because they seek support for their psychosocial and physical wellbeing. We accept that they move in with multiple chronic conditions and frailties — that is our

Operators, especially those of assisted living and memory care communities, can't pretend they are separate from or not providing healthcare. When there are dozens of frail older adults living together under one roof, excellent systems for assessment, maintaining and supporting good health are a necessity, as well as the ability to quickly respond to an evolving health crises.

Assisted living is not skilled nursing, nor is it acute care, but when new residents move in, they believe we made a commitment to monitor and obtain the medical care necessary to keep them safe. Implicitly, that sounds as if we are saying we offer healthcare ... and most assisted living and memory care communities have some nursing on-site, another implicit message that we offer healthcare.

We will be stronger in the future

Senior housing has been hit hard by the COVID virus — both in devastating effects on residents and staff members and also in lay media coverage that portrays the industry as not living up to its expected standards.

There will be opportunities for good operators to plan for their futures and be stronger. Senior living offers innovative environments to support resident quality of life and independence but also must focus on improved systems in health monitoring and care.

As we learned in this most recent crisis, the idea of calling 911 and transporting all sick residents to the hospital isn't going to keep our residents safe nor portray us as caring and competent. To be leaders in the care of older adults, senior living operators must learn and adapt and perfect their systems of health monitoring and care.

If we are going to prevent another outbreak from running rampant through senior living communities, then we are going to have to start providing better care to our elderly residents. Even in this disaster, there are opportunities.



Aging Services Providers Call Out Congress for 'Walking Out on Older Americans' During Pandemic

After Congress left their last session without reaching a stimulus deal many industries are left hanging without answers as to a sustainable future. Senior Living has more uncertainty than most others and without any further planned funding or assistance there are many service providers who feel let down by the current state of affairs.

Written by: Kimberly Bonvissuto

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Nonprofit aging services leaders from some states hit hardest by COVID-19 shared their challenges amidst the pandemic on Friday and called out Congress for taking a summer recess.

Nonprofit aging services leaders from some states hit hardest by COVID-19 shared their challenges amidst the pandemic on Friday and called out Congress for taking a summer recess.

LeadingAge President and CEO Katie Smith Sloan said older Americans “never imagined Congress would walk away from them,” taking a summer recess while they remain under “mortal threat” from the virus. She said aging service providers continue to deal with “patchwork solutions” while federal assistance is “long on promises and short on action.”

“It’s time for Congress to get back to work,” Sloan said. “It’s time to put older adults at the front of the line, right alongside hospitals, for vital resources.”

Aging services leaders from Ohio, Indiana, Missouri and Montana participated in a Zoom conference led by LeadingAge on Friday to share the staffing, testing and personal protective equipment challenges they face in their states.

Kathryn Brod, president and CEO of LeadingAge Ohio, said PPE has been a “bumpy ride” in terms of access and cost. Although the supply chain has improved from the early days of the pandemic, she said, PPE has come at a “tremendous cost” to providers. A single-use gown, Brod said, has increased in price from 25 cents to \$2 — an eight-fold increase for just one item.

“In Ohio, since COVID-19’s arrival, testing has been the Achilles’ heel of all strategies,” Brod said, adding that initially the biggest challenge was scarcity of testing. Now baseline testing for all staff is presenting funding and lab capacity challenges, and testing efforts in assisted living are different than testing methods in nursing homes, creating confusion among providers. “Repeated prevalence testing — testing of all staff — is not only costly for processing, but costly from a staffing perspective, requiring staff support already stretched and in short supply.”

Brod also noted that now staff members have increased COVID-19-related responsibilities, including heightened infection control procedures, outdoor visitation monitoring and screening requirements.

Danny Williams, president and CEO of Eliza Bryant Village in Cleveland runs the oldest, continually operating African-American-founded long-term care facility in the country, providing skilled nursing, adult day care, affordable independent senior housing and safe housing for older adults experiencing trauma and abuse. He said his facility took advantage of emergency funding from public sources and private philanthropy, but he’s worried about what happens after those relief efforts dry up.

“Despite the challenges, we’re still here,” Williams said, “but we need to know help is on the way.”

David Trost, president and CEO of St. John’s United, a Billings, MT, provider of independent and assisted living as well as skilled nursing and continuum-of-care services, said his facility is facing a \$6 million loss in annual revenue due to occupancy declines and resource limitations.

“We’ve been on our own, creating our own solutions, using our own epidemiologist and lobbying for our own support,” Trost said. “The [first outbreak](#) in our country was at a long-term care facility in Kirkland, WA. Yet long-term care didn’t receive its first shipment of PPE from national stockpiles until months later.” Those shipments were to nursing homes; assisted living has not received federal aid, other than a small number of facilities serving Medicaid beneficiaries.

“This lack of attention on long-term care facilities greatly contributed to a spike in long-term care deaths. If CARES [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security] Act funds were deployed in parity with hospitals from the onset, I would ascertain we would be in a far different place today,” Trost said.

Eric Essley, president and CEO of LeadingAge Indiana, said that along with the PPE shortages, staffing challenges and cost increases, facilities now are focusing on schools reopening and outbreaks affecting mothers and fathers who are long-term facility caregivers.

“They are one shift away from not being able to come to work and support the folks they are caring for,” he said.

Gary Anderson, CEO of Lutheran Senior Services, a St. Louis, MO-based organization providing independent living, assisted living, memory care and skilled nursing and rehab, said his company began universally testing all staff members — almost 3,800 employees — on a weekly basis because it became evident that staff members were the source of spread in long-term care.

Anderson said his facility is on track to spend almost \$1.5 million on staff testing. And although he’s been told it’s a reimbursable expense, he has yet to see that reimbursement and is concerned it may not come to fruition.

“We’re taking on the front-end expense,” Anderson said, noting testing involves not only the cost of the test, but the labor involved in administering the tests. “I’ve not seen evidence we will be fully reimbursed for these expenses.”

Williams said liability insurance is becoming an issue. Some facilities are pulling staff members to create isolation units to care for COVID-19-positive patients from hospitals and other facilities.

“If you decide to become an isolation center and help out the state, you may have a problem getting liability insurance,” Williams said. “By trying to do the right thing to help out the state, you may limit your staff and make yourself uninsurable.”

Without a national testing strategy, Sloan said, every state has had to figure out a strategy on its own, leading to inconsistencies from state to state, and sometimes inconsistencies within a state.



Voices Growing in Call for Senior Living to Receive Federal Aid

With the separation between the Senior Living and Skilled Nursing systems, there are many gaps that have been in the way and assistance for senior living is a long way from being finalized. Federal relief is the key to keeping many communities afloat and the leaders involved are expected to take more action.

Written by: Lois A. Bowers

8/17/2020

Although members of the Senate and House of Representatives [may return to the nation's capital](#) later this week — back from their state and district work periods several weeks earlier than expected — to look into concerns related to the U.S. Postal Service, it remains uncertain when negotiations around the next coronavirus-related relief bill will resume in full force.

For months now, industry associations have been making the case for senior living operators to be included in a federal package.

The American Health Care Association / National Center for Assisted Living, LeadingAge, Argentum and the American Seniors Housing Association, among other organizations, have been writing members of Congress, the president and vice president. They've been releasing estimates of costs senior living providers will incur overall and for testing of residents and staff. They've come together to organize the [collection of senior living data](#) to ease distribution determinations by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. They've held press conferences and appeared on national television news programs to make their case. And in addition to these and other public efforts, they've been working behind the scenes, as always.

Increasingly, their messages are being heard, and other voices are joining their pleas.

In a [July 31 blog](#) in The Hill, for instance, U.S. Rep. Kay Granger (R-TX), the ranking member of the House Appropriations Committee, called on the Department of Health and Human Services to place senior living communities on the same playing field as nursing homes in the prioritization of resources to fight COVID-19.

"The administration did a good job of prioritizing nursing homes early on in the pandemic so that they could get the personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies they needed. But many of our elderly don't live in nursing homes; they live in senior living facilities. ... They should have the same access to rapid results testing kits and supplies of PPE and funding as nursing homes," Granger wrote.

And Granger's voice was joined last week by U.S. Sen. Steve Daines (R-MT), a member of the Finance and Appropriations committees in the Senate.

Daines sent [a letter](#) to HHS Secretary Alex Azar on Wednesday urging that senior living providers be included in a future allocation from the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund.

"While they often care for similar populations as nursing homes, with more than half of all residents over the age of 85 and often suffering comorbidities, these communities that are not primarily supported by Medicaid funds have by and large not received financial relief as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. ... The healthcare heroes in these communities are on the front lines of this crisis, and while they continue to do everything they can to care for our nation's seniors and mitigate the spread of COVID-19, they need financial relief," Daines wrote.

These messages from members of Congress are especially significant because they mention senior living specifically and don't refer to communities vaguely as "other long-term care facilities" or lump senior living's needs in with those of skilled nursing.

Those in the industry will keep pressing the message to the federal executive and legislative branches and others. Let's hope others hear and act on that message — soon.



Senior Living Industry Seeks to Expand a Covid-19 Hospitality Hiring Wave

Hospitality is one of the most important segments of the country, especially in the Senior Living model. Many administrators are trying to find a way to draw in the talent needed to keep their operations running smoothly, but the threat of further spread of the virus and lack of funding presents further challenges.

Written by: Tim Regan

8/10/2020

Senior living providers have succeeded in recruiting displaced hospitality workers during Covid-19 — but some positions are harder to hire for than others.

Just ask Adam Kaplan, founder and CEO of Solera Senior Living, a Denver-based senior living provider with three senior living communities under management today and another six in the works. In March, Kaplan and his team [scrambled to recruit hospitality sector workers](#) who lost their jobs in Covid-related layoffs and furloughs. And that strategy has paid off in the roughly four months since, particularly with regard to hiring community-level managers and corporate staff.

“We tried to recruit for a culinary director position in Denver, but it was really challenging,” Kaplan said. “Then Covid happened, and all of a sudden, we knew we could pretty much go after anyone in the market. So, the environment has changed dramatically.”

But while it’s gotten easier to hire leadership positions in the post-Covid world, Solera is also finding it more challenging than before to fill frontline positions like nurses, caregivers and medical technicians. That has pushed the company to cast a wider net when searching for new workers, and to become more creative in how it hires them.

“We’ll continue to keep an open mind as we’re growing, looking at talent both internally in the industry and externally,” Kaplan said. “And we’ll make sure that we’re being open to people that have a strong skillset, but might not have senior living experience.”

But the winds could be changing again, given that new unemployment benefits for out-of-work Americans [are still not certain](#) and that providers, workforce technology firms and industry associations are all still working to build momentum toward hiring hospitality workers.

Hospitality hit hard

The hospitality industry was among the hardest-hit sectors when the Covid-19 pandemic roared into view earlier this year.

The leisure and hospitality sector has shed 4.8 million jobs since February, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics stats [shared](#) by the American Hotel & Lodging Association.

And although the leisure and hospitality [added 592,000 jobs in July](#), recent snapshots from across the sector have painted a dire employment picture. Many hotels have been operating with [less than half](#) of their normal pre-pandemic staffing levels, the American Hotel & Lodging Association noted. And nearly 100,000 dining venues that reopened since the pandemic began were forced to close again by state or local mandates as of late July, according to data from the National Restaurant Association.

The U.S. unemployment rate hit 10.2% in July. Meanwhile, the \$600 unemployment relief check that many Americans relied on to make ends meet during the pandemic is gone, with questions as to [what, if anything, will replace it](#).

Technology companies which are focused on senior living staffing have reported a noticeable uptick in interest among job applicants in recent months.

Arena — a Baltimore-based data analytics firm with a predictive hiring platform for the senior living industry — has grown the number of buildings in which it's deployed by about 70% since April, according to Chairman and CEO Michael Rosenbaum. April is the month Arena launched a new “sourcing product” aimed at finding potential workers who aren't in an organization's current applicant pool, such as hospitality workers.

“We would go directly to folks in the [hospitality] world through a variety of channels, like social media, job boards, schools and community partners,” Rosenbaum told SHN. “By doing that, we were able to draw more folks onto the platform.”

Senior living provider association Argentum partnered with the American Seniors Housing Association (ASHA) in April to launch Senior Living FastMatch, an online resource that uses Arena's talent discovery platform to match candidates to positions in senior living. FastMatch has fielded more than 45,000 jobseekers and has seen a marked increase in internet traffic since mid-July.

Kare — a [recently launched staffing app](#) meant to connect senior housing and care communities with workers — has seen so much interest from former hospitality workers wanting to get on its platform that it has had to stop taking applications from them, according to CEO Charles Turner. That includes former cooks, housekeepers and other restaurant and hotel workers wanting to get into the senior living industry.

“We were getting about 75 to 100 applicants a day, just for hospitality workers,” Turner told SHN. “We have way more than we can ever supply shifts for, at least in our current state of evolution.”

Although it's clear the new employment landscape contributed to more job applications and inquiries from hospitality, retail, and restaurant workers than before Covid-19, there are still some barriers to successfully recruiting them, according to Brent Weil, vice president of workforce development for Argentum.

Weil believes the \$600 unemployment payments through the CARES Act had helped suppress some interest from jobseekers — though some economists who have studied the benefits [think it's more complicated than that](#). There is also a perception among other prospective applicants that senior living poses a greater risk of exposure to Covid-19, he said.

Given the fact that Covid-19 has only complicated staffing woes for the senior living industry, providers would do well to overcome these and other obstacles. And, many of these laid-off or furloughed workers aren't likely to return to their old jobs anytime soon.

“It appears likely that for large sectors of the American economy, the furloughs and hours reductions this spring will increasingly turn to permanent layoffs,” Weil said. “We believe senior living should be top of mind for individuals seeking new careers, and we are committed to working with our members and partners, like Arena, to reach those future workers.”

Solera's recruitment strategy

While Solera has found it's much easier than before to attract community or corporate leaders from the hospitality world, the company is still taking a proactive approach to potential employees, especially on business networking sites like LinkedIn.

When Solera does reach out to job candidates, the messages are crafted in a way that hospitality workers can relate to, with lots of emphasis on innovation, next-generation culture and being a leader in hospitality. Solera also makes it a point to talk about how the company grows and nurtures new talent.

“There are certain people who are taking a step back to join our organization, or maybe they were on the cusp of a promotion with their previous employer,” Kaplan said. “It’s a good story to tell people that, hey, we’re in a great position.”

Some Argentum members have also reported successful recruitment campaigns that highlight the career opportunities in senior living, with social media being an important component of that messaging, according to Weil.

Solera has had a much harder time filling frontline positions. Part of the problem is that, unlike for leadership positions, recruiters can’t wait for long for the right candidate to show up. Like Weil, Kaplan also wonders how much of an effect the \$600 weekly unemployment benefits have had on recruiting.

“We can’t just go to Hilton in a market and ask them, ‘Hey, what housekeepers have you furloughed?’ and then hire them,” Kaplan said. “We haven’t found a pathway yet that we can pull people from hospitality into senior living.”

In the meantime, the company has broadened its search for new workers. Solera recently implemented iCIMS, a cloud-based recruiting platform, to streamline its hiring process and gain better visibility on what’s working and what’s not. Solera also has focused on hiring experienced leaders who can hopefully attract others into the senior living field.

“If you get good people in management positions who are high performers, and who people respect, they will attract other talent,” Kaplan said. “The most important thing we can do is provide a great experience for people when they join the organization.”