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Assisted Living Could be Next in Line for COVID Relief Funds

Since the COVID pandemic started to impact the U.S. there has been a need for funding in the Senior Living industry. For months, it seemed like the pleas for assistance had been going unnoticed, but it seems that there is progress being made in the latest Congressional hearings.

Written by: Kimberly Bonvissuto

8/24/2020

Senior living providers are expected to have access soon to funding from the federal government to help them with their COVID-19-related expenses, according to the American Seniors Housing Association.

ASHA President David S. Schless told McKnight's Senior Living that the organization is awaiting an announcement and the opening of an application portal for private-pay assisted living operators but said that the organization heard from the Department of Health and Human Services that such providers will soon have access to the HHS Provider Relief Fund.

Although a total dollar allocation for industry providers has not been disclosed, it is thought that the formula will be similar to HHS funding distributions to other types of healthcare organizations: 2% of 2019 gross revenues. "A 2% allocation is not going to be nearly enough to cover the expense and loss sustained by the industry," however, Schless said.

Details of potential aid are still being worked out, but industry representatives said they are hopeful for a coming announcement.

"The HHS office of the secretary, to its credit, is engaging all aging service provider associations in conversations about how to structure provider relief allocations," LeadingAge President and CEO Katie Smith Sloan told McKnight's Senior Living. "They're listening to our members' concerns and their needs."

The announcement of potential funding comes after a National Center for Assisted Living [survey](#) found that half

of assisted living providers said they are operating at a loss, and 64% said they won't be able to sustain operations for another year. It also comes after a [scaled-back coronavirus relief package](#) circulated this week by Senate Republicans was said to include corporate liability protection related to coronavirus, as well as funding for testing, but no additional funding for healthcare provider grants.

NCAL, LeadingAge, Argentum and ASHA, among other organizations, have been writing leaders in Congress and the Trump administration, repeatedly [making the case](#) for senior living operators to be included in a federal relief package. The associations recently [created a portal](#) through which licensed, registered or certified assisted living operators were able to submit data to help HHS make aid-related decisions.

Most assisted living providers have not received any direct federal funding in previous relief efforts.

The Department of Health and Human Services included assisted living providers that care for Medicaid recipients in a [phase 2 general distribution](#) of \$15 million from the CARES Act Provider Relief Fund. Payments were 2% of annual revenue from patient care. Forty-eight percent of assisted living communities are Medicaid-certified, and approximately 16.5% of assisted living residents rely on Medicaid to cover their assisted living services, according to NCAL.



Senior Living Needs COVID-19 Tests, Too, Argentum Tells HHS as Ohio Issues Mandate

The state of Ohio has taken action to make sure that testing for COVID not only reaches hospitals and nursing facilities, the governor recognizes that assisted living communities must also participate in order to protect the health of the senior population. Assisted living staff are also being taken into consideration as the prevention efforts expand statewide.

Written by: Kimberly Bonvissuto & Lois A. Bowers

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Nursing homes aren't the only long-term care settings that need testing capabilities amid the coronavirus pandemic, Argentum President and CEO James Balda said Friday, a day after the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced that it would be [sending tests](#) that can rapidly diagnose SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, to approximately 14,000 nursing homes via the Defense Production Act.

"Assisted living and other senior living providers also require access to and support for rapid and accurate testing," Balda said. "COVID-19 testing that offers quick and valid results is essential for all communities serving vulnerable older adults, as those results inform critical operation decisions. While we continue to appreciate the support the federal government is providing to nursing homes, senior living communities have equally urgent needs and also require prioritization for testing."

Unlike nursing homes, private-pay assisted living providers have not received any direct federal funding for COVID-19-related expenses while incurring significant costs for testing, personal protective equipment, “hero pay” for staff members, and cleaning supplies.

The HHS announcement about testing for nursing homes came on the same day that Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine announced an impending state Department of Health [order](#) requiring all licensed assisted living communities in the Buckeye State to conduct baseline saliva testing for COVID-19 in residents and staff members. That order is effective today.

The statewide testing initiative, announced by DeWine on Thursday, will provide the testing at no cost to Ohio’s more than 765 assisted living communities.

Pete Van Runkle, executive director of the Ohio Health Care Association, said his organization has heard concerns from members about how long the saliva tests take to administer, but they appreciate that the governor’s order allows providers to choose the testing method to use at each community.

“We would prefer that, because of the slow turnaround time on these mass screening tests, which already are in place for skilled nursing facilities, the state use strategic testing for both staff and residents,” Van Runkle told *McKnight’s Senior Living*.

The minimally invasive tests, which can be self-performed under the guidance of licensed medical staff, have a results turnaround time of 48 hours, DeWine said. The statewide initiative aligns with Ohio’s efforts to test all nursing home residents for the coronavirus. The additional testing in assisted living will enable public health departments to conduct contact tracing sooner, the governor said.

“Our focus has been and remains on protecting Ohioans while navigating this pandemic,” DeWine [tweeted](#). “To achieve this, we must have 100% participation of all assisted living facilities across Ohio.”

DeWine also announced that senior centers and adult day centers can reopen Sept. 21 at reduced capacity.

In other coronavirus-related news:

- South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster has requested that the state Department of Health and Environmental Control “promptly issue [up-to-date visitation guidelines](#) providing all direction and information deemed necessary to resume — or require resumption if necessary — in-person visitation with residents in nursing homes and assisted living facilities.”
- A work group in Utah is considering [easing restrictions](#) and allowing assisted living and nursing home residents to have visitors indoors “where it’s safe and where it’s prudent” and with “strict guidelines” related to COVID-19 cases in facilities and the regions in which they are located, according to the state health department. Even when deemed safe by the state, it would be up to individual facilities whether to allow indoor visits.
- Family members of long-term care residents could be deemed “essential caregivers” and be [permitted to visit](#) loved ones indoors under a bill being written by a Pennsylvania state legislator. The state health department also said it hopes to offer related guidance by the end of the month.
- Therese Ellis has taken a job at assisted living and memory care community Grand Villa of St. Petersburg in Florida so she can [see her 90-year-old father](#), who is a resident there. Ellis is teaching a life enrichment class, which her father often attends. Parent company Grand Villa Senior Living has several communities across the state and is encouraging other residents’ family members to apply for open positions.



Disinfecting Senior Living Communities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

One of the pillars of infection prevention is disinfecting frequently-used rooms and surfaces. Proper cleaning and disinfecting is often overlooked but cannot be taken for granted in assisted living communities. Below is an overview of how to properly disinfect throughout any home or living space.

Written by: Noel McCarthy

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Statistical analysis underlies virtually everything we do, from estimating the number of Social Security checks that need to be mailed each month to how much fuel an airliner needs to take it from Japan to Turkey. Bottom line: We just can't function without statistics. But statistics also haunt us these days, especially when it comes to calculating the human suffering that the COVID-19 virus has unleashed worldwide.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), more than 2 million Americans live in long-term care settings, including the nation's approximately 28,900 assisted living communities and 15,600 federally regulated nursing homes. Together, this adds up to the possibility of a catastrophic outcome if senior living communities and skilled nursing facilities don't exercise every option in their health and safety procedures.

True, we don't yet have a vaccine for COVID-19, and none of our existing pharmaceuticals have proven to be effective in combating the virus, but there are things we can do to mitigate the effects of this pandemic. Case in point: Disinfecting our facilities as often as we (practically) can.

First Things First

In a recent article about [disinfecting the home](#), I pointed out that there is a big difference between disinfecting a room (or an office, kitchen, or store) and merely cleaning it. In practical terms, that means the difference between a place that just *looks* clean, as opposed to one that is *truly* free of contamination. Achieving a contamination-free site requires a lot of work. Here are some basic steps:

Individual rooms / suites

With social distancing protocols in place, there's a good chance that the vast majority of the residents in your community spend a great deal of their time in their rooms or suites. Your cleaning staff (more about them later) should focus their attention on all of the rooms' hard surfaces, tables, chairs, door handles, bed frames, window frames and ledges, the inside surface of the entryway door, and the floor.

The entire floor (or floors, in the case of suites) may be carpeted, which means that a wet-and-dry auto vacuum should be used. What's more, the same appliance also can be used on an uncarpeted surface such as wood or linoleum. Just make sure that your cleaning crew uses the correct cleaning liquids.

And don't forget the curtains and blinds, as well as televisions sets, remotes and laptops.

Finally, pay special attention to items such as bed linens, pillows, coverlets, duvets and clothing. With the exception of clothing that needs to be dry-cleaned, the rest of these items should be laundered as often as possible. Linens, sheets, coverlets and pillows ought to be washed in the highest water temperature possible and dried on as high a temperature as is practical.

Bathrooms / showers

Whether such conveniences are shared or each room or suite has its own bathroom, these facilities should be cleaned at least once a day. All of the hard surfaces should be disinfected, and that includes door handles, hand rails, toilets, toilet handles, towel racks, clothing hooks, light switches, mirrors, showers (especially drainage grates), bathtubs, window sills, faucets and shower heads. The walls and floors also should be disinfected thoroughly.

It's also important that items such as washcloths, towels and bath floor mats are laundered on a regular basis. And none of these soft items should ever be shared by the residents, ever.

Sitting rooms / television rooms / libraries / communal areas

Even if you are enforcing social distancing rules, many of your residents may elect to use your facility's communal areas. As such, these areas must be cleaned and disinfected as often as possible. Focus on those 'high touch' areas, such as door knobs, handles/handrails, tables, card tables, televisions, remotes, intercom systems (if any), couches, chairs, settees, laptops (especially those equipped with touchscreens), magazine/paper racks, vending machines, vases, picture frames, book cases, shelves, window frames and of course, exercise machines.

Remember that all the floors should be swept (or vacuumed) and any refuse removed before you begin the disinfection procedure. Whichever disinfectant you use, allow *all* of the wet surfaces to dry entirely before allowing residents back in.

Kitchens / food preparation areas

Many of your residents (especially in independent and assisted living communities) will have their own kitchens or food preparation areas, and these areas need special attention. The fact is that kitchens — and this applies equally to private kitchens as well as your communal food prep areas — are more likely to harbor bacteria than any location in your facility.

That's why it's incumbent on you to ensure that all appliances, such as stoves, microwaves, refrigerators, freezers, toasters and dishwashers, are spotless. And that also applies to light fixtures, cabinets, pantries and food preparation surfaces. All of these items or areas should be painstakingly cleaned *and* systematically disinfected before and after each meal time. No exceptions!

Keeping you and your staff safe

The CDC has issued several useful guides and papers designed to help safely navigate this COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, its site [provides detailed safety guidance](#) in such areas as worker safety and support, [retirement and independent living communities](#), schools and child care, colleges and universities, businesses and workplaces, gatherings and community events, community and faith-based organizations, and correctional and detention facilities, among many others.

Plus, you also can contact your county and state authorities for information regarding your locality's specific regulations and guidelines for dealing with COVID-19. The national law firm Husch Blackwell also has a [free online guide](#) about assisted living-related regulations issued by each state



New Executive Director Moved into Senior Living Community During Pandemic

Patricia Gustin, the newly appointed Executive Director of Emerald Court, has always had strong ties to the senior living industry. By moving into the Emerald Court community in Anaheim, CA, Gustin has placed herself within the building that she serves and she is proving that her presence is needed in this challenging time when the care for all of her residents and employees is under siege by COVID-19.

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In April, as the COVID-19 global pandemic was taking hold, Emerald Court welcomed Patricia Gustin as its new Executive Director. Gustin was not new to Kisco Senior Living but was new to the Emerald Court community in Anaheim. It was a unique time to take a new position in another state, but Gustin was ecstatic to return to a company in which she had full confidence and jump in headfirst. Knowing it is critical for directors to know the team members they lead and the residents they care for, she decided to move into the community to live there among the residents.

Gustin understood that moving from her home in Fresno to Anaheim before her start date on April 13 was going to be a huge challenge – considering social distancing and other safety protocols already in place due to COVID-19. But she decided the best option was to completely immerse herself in the community and allow the residents and staff to get to know her as well. "It's still difficult for some of the seniors to recognize me wearing masks all the time, but it has been beneficial to spend more time around them, and some residents are recognizing me perhaps a little faster than otherwise."

Since starting at Emerald Court, Gustin has primarily focused on adapting her teams to meet high standards for new community procedures, revising responsibilities of team members to fill any gaps, and restructuring what her residents' lives will look like in this new environment. She has also made a priority of making sure the residents know she's around and supporting every facet of the community. Gustin carves out time between operational responsibilities to get to know her team members better, volunteering to do temperature checks, assisting in resident activities, and writing memos to keep in touch and become more familiar to residents and their families.

This unusual move wasn't out of the blue for Gustin, but more of a long-awaited and aptly timed homecoming. Gustin's experience with Kisco began years ago when she was an HR director for a community in Fresno, CA. Kisco saw potential in Gustin and gave her the opportunity to train into an executive director role. When Kisco sold the outlier community, Gustin stayed to ensure that the transition was smooth and that the residents and associate staff were safe and satisfied.

"Of course, I was very nervous when COVID-19 began spreading in the U.S. and companies started to close down. I had been wanting to return to Kisco and knew that this time I needed to make the move," Gustin shares about her decision. "I've had more confidence in Kisco than any other company to take care of its employees,

which is essential during a pandemic. That's exactly what Kisco has done; they've made sure to keep the best interest in helping directors lead their communities through this. They trust and value their people better than other companies, and I believe in them." The second Gustin saw an executive director opening in Anaheim for Emerald Court, she jumped on the opportunity.

This experience has been one that Gustin will never forget. "One of the beautiful parts about working in senior living is getting to really know the residents as well as their families when they visit, and because of safe social distancing I haven't been able to have that interaction with family members. I am also not used to telling residents 'no' and I hate having to do it." Gustin has been exploring ways to keep residents' quality of life high and looks for ways to say "yes" again.

"It's been one of the biggest challenges to juggle the priorities of the business while continuing to create ways to make every moment count for these residents," shared Gustin. She attributes her success to the support and training she's received from Kisco and to the associates at Emerald Court. Gustin raves, "I'm very lucky to have this team. This experience would be more challenging without each of them. I can't have big staff meetings right now, so it's good to know I can depend on my managers and that we're all dedicated to improving the lives of these residents."

Gustin believes that when people face adversity, they have two choices: to rise up or to hide under a rock. Becoming Emerald Court's executive director has allowed Gustin to take strides outside of her comfort zone. "It has been greater than I imagined, and I hope the whole community will come out of this better than before. I'm not striving to be the best, but I will work my hardest to ensure everyone in this community is taken care of."