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Senior Living Communities Reopening amid COVID-19 Vaccinations, Drop in Cases

Written by: Kimberly Bonvissuto

2/5/2021

Armed with COVID-19 vaccinations and a drop in coronavirus cases in the general community, senior living communities across the country are slowly beginning to reopen their doors to visitors after months of a pandemic lockdown.

In [North Dakota](#), 90% of the state's basic care and assisted living communities are reopening their doors to visitors. Each community's protocols vary, but in recent weeks, assisted living communities and skilled nursing facilities are allowing some form of indoor visitation.

In Minnesota, the Department of Health has not changed its visitation guidelines, but the state is beginning to loosen general restrictions that have been in place since March 2020. [Pre-scheduled visits](#) can be arranged at some senior living communities but require that there have been no new coronavirus cases for at least 14 days. Guidelines include social distancing, limits on the number of visitors and restrictions on visitor movement inside communities.

In [Colorado](#), a combination of vaccines, repeated negative COVID-19 tests and a low level of community spread is allowing some senior living communities to reopen visitation and allow residents to partake in bingo and short field trips.

[Vermont](#) is beginning to make plans to allow long-term care residents to have more contact with each other and the outside world. The move comes after 85% of assisted living, residential care and skilled nursing facility residents have had at least the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccines.

Essential caregivers

In Indiana, [Senate Bill 202](#) was introduced this week by state Sen. Linda Rogers (R-Granger), requiring health facilities and residential care facilities, including assisted living communities, to participate in the state

Compassionate Care Program and the [Essential Caregiver Program](#). Both programs were established by the Indiana State Department of Health and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

These programs allow residents to designate an essential family caregiver who would be permitted to visit a resident for whom they care during a public health emergency. The compassionate care program includes end-of-life visits or any situation in which a resident is struggling physically or emotionally.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, many families have been unable to visit and check on the welfare of their loved ones in long-term care facilities,” Rogers said in a statement. “SB 202 would address this issue by ensuring an essential family caregiver is able to provide important support and companionship to a resident.

The bill also would provide civil immunity to long-term care facilities participating in the programs, unless their behavior constitutes “gross negligence or willful or wanton misconduct.”

[Illinois](#), [Florida](#), [Minnesota](#), Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas are among the states that have adopted essential caregivers programs. [Washington](#) state is considering a bill allowing visitation by an essential support person. Argentum also released an [Essential Caregiver Toolkit](#) to help senior living communities and operators establish essential caregiver programs to combat the social isolation residents experienced during the pandemic.



Hope Arrives for Independent Living Through Creative Solutions, Mobile Units

Written by: Kimberly Bonvissuto

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As states and local public health agencies reclaim unused vaccines from the federal Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care program and the Federal Retail Pharmacy Program [gets ready to roll out](#), attention is finally turning to opening up vaccination in a big way to independent living residents.

Independent living communities [were not included](#) in the federal Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care program that brought on-site vaccination clinics to assisted living communities and skilled nursing facilities, despite the fact that some live within continuing care retirement community campuses that include multiple levels of care and services.

Creative outreach

Holiday Retirement announced Friday that it has secured access to COVID-19 vaccines at 100 of its independent living communities. The Winter Park, FL-based company, which serves more than 30,000 residents in 43 states, said it worked to educate vaccine clinic providers about the vulnerability of the population as the sector was passed over for vaccinations by the long-term care pharmacy program.

“We are just as disappointed as our residents, resident family members and community employees that independent living has not been prioritized through the federal government,” Holiday CEO Lilly Donohue said in a statement. “Through our own creative local outreach, we have been able to secure providers and / or complete vaccination clinics for more than a third of our communities.”

Holiday’s goal is to reach 100% of its communities by the end of the month. The company is working toward that goal by having its team work with state decision-makers and local county health departments, grocery store pharmacies and other providers to request vaccination clinics onsite at the communities.

“We believe that every resident should have access to safely receive the vaccine in our community without the headache of travel, long lines and additional risk exposure,” Donohue said. “We will continue local outreach for each community until a federal program prioritizes independent living across the nation, or until access to the vaccine is provided to all Holiday Retirement communities.”

State attention

Maryland is one state turning its attention to vaccinating older adults in independent living communities. Jan. 31, Gov. Larry Hogan sent a [memorandum](#) to local health and aging officials directing them to prioritize independent living in the coming weeks.

Maryland’s Department of Aging is working with local agencies on aging and local health officials to identify independent living communities where residents have not been vaccinated, as well as with local COVID-19 vaccine providers to arrange vaccination clinics. The state said it will focus on vaccinating residents at at least one independent living community in each local jurisdiction per week.

Jefferson’s Ferry, a not-for-profit life plan community in New York, recently expanded its COVID-19 vaccination program to include residents in its independent living cottages and apartments, as well as employees responsible for maintaining those residents, buildings and grounds.

Vaccination of skilled nursing residents and staff members at the retirement community’s Vincent Bove Health Center was completed through the federal program for long-term care, along with first doses for assisted living residents and staff members. Independent living vaccinations began Jan. 27 and 28, and second doses are scheduled for Feb. 17 and 18.

“We are excited about what the vaccine has to offer in health and in re-establishing normalcy within our community,” Jefferson’s Ferry President and CEO Bob Caulfield said in a statement. Vice President of Resident Life Linda Kolakowski added that the vaccine clinic “represents an important milestone” for residents and staff.

The Ohio Health Care Association [reported](#) that the state has a plan for vaccinating people in congregate care settings, including independent living residents, after the federal Pharmacy Partnership in Long-Term Care ends. The Ohio Department of Health indicated that the plan will involve long-term care pharmacies and will roll out in the next week or two.

The [Colorado Department of Public Health](#) said it is trying to pair independent living communities with local vaccination providers, hosting pop-up vaccine clinics. One Lakewood, CO, provider isn’t waiting, according to media outlet KDVR. Carmel Oaks’ staff members are finding appointments for their residents, even driving them across town to get shots.

Mobile clinics

Meanwhile, Sanford Health used its [mobile clinic](#) to take COVID-19 vaccines on the road to two of its

independent living communities in Sioux Falls, SD. The Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society's Prairie Creek Lodge and Meadow Stone communities had 108 residents vaccinated. The mobile clinic will return to the two campuses in the coming weeks to administer second doses.

In California, [Marin County](#) public health officials are using a mobile unit staffed with doctors from MarinHealth Medical Center and Kaiser Permanente to vaccinate approximately 80 residents and staff at Deer Park in Novato. There are plans to move on to other independent living communities as the county receives additional vaccine doses.

SENIOR HOUSING NEWS

LCS, Senior Lifestyle Execs Expect Gradual Recovery as Pent-Up Demand Returns

Written by: Tim Regan

2/4/2021

The recovery of the senior living industry in 2021 hinges in part on pent-up demand — but capturing it will be easier said than done.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, move-in rates plunged last year, contributing to [historically low occupancy rates](#) across the industry. While the extent of pent-up demand is hard to gauge, sales leaders with two of the largest U.S. senior living providers believe it does exist. But that may not translate to a sudden occupancy surge once vaccination efforts take hold and the pandemic comes under control.

“It’s not a big snapback, from my perspective, it is a gradual climb,” Rick Westermann, vice president and senior director of marketing and sales at LCS, said during the recent SHN Sales Summit. “How we [are budgeting] LCS this year is to slowly start to climb back to normalcy in 2021 as the vaccine kicks in.”

In the coming months, senior living salespeople must work to regain the trust of prospects and their families in order to rebuild occupancy. Specifically, providers will need to make the most of the coming months to demonstrate that communities can provide an active and engaging lifestyle in addition to keeping residents safe.

“As an industry, that’s something we’ll need to tackle and throughout this year, to do better in that sales process,” Westermann said.

Rate of the recovery

Although it’s a widely held belief in the industry that pent-up demand exists, not all providers agree on how that demand will materialize. For example, different care levels might see recoveries at different rates.

Janine Witte, vice president of sales for Chicago-based Senior Lifestyle Corp., is confident that demand will return. But she believes that harder-hit product types will have a longer road to recovery.

“IL took the worst hit, then assisted living, and then memory care had the least amount of impact for us,” Witte said. “And it looks like it’s crawling back the same way.”

Westermann agreed that assisted living and memory care communities and units will likely bounce back first. But he isn't down on independent living, either.

"You look at somebody's quality of life — living in their condo, in their apartment, in their house — it's not as good as it was in 2019, and there is still an advantage to coming to us," Westermann said. "So, for us, it's figuring out how we leverage that in the sales process."

The rate of recovery will also likely vary from one market to another, Witte and Westermann agreed. And they have good perspective on that, given the scale of their companies. Senior Lifestyle operates a portfolio of about 200 communities across the country. LCS, through its Life Care Services arm, operates more than 140 communities, including many large life plan communities.

Already, LCS' communities in Texas saw more move-ins between August and December than they did in 2019. And many of the company's communities in the Midwest saw move-ins similar to Q42019 levels. In areas hit hard by the pandemic, like certain markets in the Northeast, LCS is seeing slower rates of new move-ins, Westermann noted.

For Senior Lifestyle, the Northeast took "the first prize for massive volatility" in senior living lead generation, Witte said. Senior Lifestyle's communities in the Southeast also had a volatile year earlier in 2020 before falling in line in the third and fourth quarters. As long as that volatility remains, it will complicate the forecast for a recovery.

"For folks that have six, seven scheduled move-ins, and then there's a positive case and those moves are on hold ... there's a good chance you lose some of those if you're sitting on the AL and memory care side," Witte said. "Because they just might not be able to wait that two weeks."

So far, it doesn't seem like the vaccine rollouts have had a noticeable impact on move-ins, and LCS saw "seasonal pickup" of inquiry volume in January, Westermann said. Still, the company saw encouraging trends in new resident tours that month, and is betting on a slow march back to normalcy in 2021 as vaccine efforts intensify.

"We're not going to have as many inquiries, so how do we turn the inquiries we're getting [into more visits, and , to grow that number every month over these next few months?" Westermann said.

But while there are promising signs now, the industry has a lot of ground to make up on lost occupancy. And it is not going to "recover 34,000 units in 2021, no matter how much we all want to," he added.

Witte also believes 2021 will be a long road with some hurdles ahead.

"It's going to have bumps based on [Covid-19] hotspots," Witte said. "And it's going to have bumps based on anything else that changes with the vaccine or additional media stories that come out."

Tapping into demand

While the timing of a full recovery is still unclear, both LCS and Senior Lifestyle are getting more creative about the ways they maintain relationships with prospects, with the goal of nurturing them until they're ready to make a move.

And no doubt, there will be setbacks along the way, and sales pros must stay determined.

"We can develop all these wonderful ways to nurture a lead," Witte said. "But they have to be able to stay in the ring with them, and take the nos, and take the disappointment, and deal with the voicemails and the unresponded

emails and the face-to-face that they won't meet you for — and still keep going.”

The current state of play is one where salespeople will have to put in more work than before to see pre-pandemic conversion rates among new leads. And at the same time, there are fewer leads coming in. But there is a silver lining to this more challenging period, too, in that providers are more savvy than in recent years. And that may help propel the industry forward in the months or years ahead.

“If you look at all the messaging we're all pushing out that we didn't do in 2018 and 2019, we're way better at it. We're doing virtual book clubs, we're talking about vaccine priority ... and it looks different, it feels different, for the prospect,” Westermann said. “I think we're going to learn some great lessons this year that are going to help us moving into the future.”

On the messaging front, Senior Lifestyle believes the Covid-19 vaccine can make a difference in attracting older adults and their families who are on the fence about moving into a community.

“More great stories around the vaccine are going to be important,” Wite said. “And how we can keep finding ways to put families back together with their loved ones that we're taking care of will really make it all magic again.”

Rent concessions, a hot-button topic in the senior living industry, can also be a useful tool in capturing pent-up demand when used sparingly and smartly, Westermann said.

“For us, it's figuring out how to leverage some to get leases signed, but at the same time, address our value that we have as an industry,” he added.

And Covid-19 has depressed occupancy all across the industry, necessitating a more aggressive approach on pricing as competition heats up, according to Witte.

“The whole country is in a lease up mode, very few communities really held their occupancy, we have folks that want to go home because the visitations drag on too long,” Witte said. “We have to not only win back what we need, we have to win back a little bit more, and then win back even more to make up for last year's losses.”

SENIOR HOUSING NEWS

Chipotle Turnaround Offers Lessons for Senior Living Industry's Covid-19 Effort

Written by: Tim Regan

2/4/2021

Fast casual burrito giant Chipotle (NYSE: CMG) was struggling with outbreaks that prompted a temporary closure of all of its U.S. stores and led to negative headlines across the country.

The year was 2015, and the culprit was a string of foodborne illnesses caused by E. coli, salmonella and norovirus [that ultimately sickened 1,100 people](#) in the years that followed. That period [led to a crisis](#) for the company, and damaged its reputation in the eyes of consumers. But only a few years later, Chipotle is on firmer footing thanks to a [turnaround plan](#) centered on transparency about its ingredients and processes, and on listening to the desires of its customers.

William Espey was there. He helped grow the company's brand and develop its voice as a creative director and brand voice lead for nine years until 2018. Though Covid-19 is a problem of much greater magnitude than what Chipotle faced in 2015, Espey believes there are some lessons that senior living providers can learn from the burrito purveyor's road to recovery.

"You can set a standard for transparency and procedure that simply didn't exist before," Espey said, as moderator of an Argentum webinar Thursday. "There's an opportunity to become more through this, and I think better through this."

No doubt, the senior living industry has sustained some damage to its reputation, and faces a long road to recovery in 2021. But the leaders behind three large operators — Brandywine Living, Discovery Senior Living and Eclipse — think the industry has an opportunity to distinguish itself in the eyes of prospective customers, similar to what Chipotle did in the aftermath of its crisis.

"We've got great opportunities to talk about how well we've done in extremely difficult circumstances," said Brandywine President and CEO Brenda Bacon during the webinar. "We know there's going to be change, and we just have to figure out as an industry how to take advantage and when to change."

The Covid-19 vaccine and rollout provide a crossroads for the senior living industry, according to Richard Hutchinson, CEO of Discovery Senior Living.

"We're at an inflection point, and that inflection can be good or bad depending on what we make it," Hutchinson said Thursday during the webinar. "I think we can talk about all the outcomes, but also, I think there is some education that needs to happen with our consumer."

Regaining trust

Chipotle worked to regain the trust of its customers by giving them a window into the business. The company quickly realized it needed to provide more training for its employees, something that was complicated by turnover, according to Espey.

So, Chipotle [closed all of its stores for an entire day](#) in early 2016 to go over food safety with its employees. The company also gave out about 3 million [free burritos](#). Then, in 2018, Chipotle [launched an ad campaign](#) showing its ingredients were "For Real."

"That betrayal of trust [in 2016] took, arguably, about two years to really come out of that slump, and it ended up changing the restaurant and company completely," Espey said.

Hutchinson doesn't think providers have lost trust in the eyes of existing residents or their families — if anything, the industry has become more trustworthy in their eyes as a result of the care it has provided over the past year, he said. But he does believe the industry must work to translate that idea to prospective residents, too.

"We have to ... make sure they can see and understand and feel that trust that we've developed over these last 12 months with our existing residents and their families, and then feel confident that trusting relationship will be imparted on them," Hutchinson said.

Eclipse CEO Kai Hsiao agreed, and added that the pandemic presents an opportunity for the senior living industry to "level up" with regard to aid and recognition, and how it works with policymakers.

"If you take a look at the restaurant industry, if you take a look at even the similar skilled nursing industry, government aid was quick to come there, and I think for us, it took a little bit longer," Hsiao said. "If we want to

be at the table quickly and be understood quickly, the focus and the energy and the resources that other industries commit to public policy, we are going to have to increase to that level, as well.”

To its credit, the senior living industry has gotten much better about being transparent in the past year, Bacon said. At the beginning of the pandemic, some providers were reluctant to share even one positive case of Covid-19 for fear of a hit to sales or bad press. But now, the industry is tracking and reporting information on positive cases, deaths and vaccines every day — and transparency is a practice that is here to stay, she added.

“Our effort to try to be invisible to the federal government ... I think we paid a big cost for that,” Bacon said. “We’ve got a unique product, we’ve got a great story to tell, we saved a lot of lives, and we need to be front and center about that and very much on their radar.”

The year ahead

Looking ahead to 2021, all three executives agreed there will be chances for the industry to rebuild occupancy and begin to rebound.

Discovery has made it its goal to return to 2019 occupancy levels in 2022 through a program the company has dubbed “Full Circle.” Already, Hutchinson sees demand among consumers picking up, and some Discovery communities have even seen gains in occupancy, year over year.

Hutchinson is also confident that there is some pent-up demand waiting for senior living communities. He points to the fact that, last October as some communities eased restrictions, Discovery saw its highest level of independent living move-ins in 24 months, including before the pandemic.

“I think there is a demand for that socialization,” he said. “I think that social aspect is going to drive demand, especially on the independent living side.”

Hsiao believes the industry might still have a rough few months ahead, especially if Covid-19’s [new genetic variants](#) take hold before vaccines are administered across the country. He also thinks it may take some time for the industry to recover from its “PR black eye” from last year, and that delayed or deferred CapEx projects might complicate the timing of the recovery. And then there is also the human and emotional toll of the pandemic, which won’t be easy to surmount.

“There are a lot of variables that are still in play to get a better understanding of when that recovery is going to come,” Hsiao said.

Like Discovery, Brandywine has also seen promising early signs of recovery. The company saw a “huge pickup” in leads and sales in January of this year, Bacon said.

“But one month does not a trend make, and we’ve got a long way to go,” she added.

Still, Bacon is optimistic about the fact that senior living is still a need-driven business, and believes there is pent-up demand waiting on the other side of the pandemic — as long as, like Chipotle, providers can make their case with prospects.

“We need to aggressively address the market,” Bacon said. “We’ve got the demographics as a positive, and I think we have a story to tell of how we conducted ourselves during this pandemic.”