

Changes in Senior Care During Covid

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In a recent article on the active adult (55+) community, we spoke about the pandemic highlighting the need and desire to find ways to create safe options for reducing the risk of social isolation. This may well be one of the drivers for demand in the active adult community market. But, this theme of social isolation warrants some additional attention.

It is somewhat difficult to separate all the factors that have led to at least a near term trend of lowered life expectancy¹ throughout the pandemic. There are deaths from Covid-19 itself. Those are hard to quantify, as many comorbidities are often also at play. Even more indirect are deaths or sickness due to the delay in either seeking out or otherwise obtaining healthcare due to the risks – both real and perceived – of the pandemic. Financial stress, strain on relationships, and social isolation – all due in part to the impacts of the pandemic – have pushed many to the brink. These all account for risk factors that can lead to deteriorating mental health in our societies.

Care Homes Supporting Seniors During the Pandemic

From the early stages of the pandemic, Centers for Disease Control (CDC) was putting those above 85 at the highest risk of death from the virus. For this population, especially pre-vaccine, the virus was very dangerous. Even those older than 50 have been considered at increased risk.

In the months following March and April 2020, enough was known about these realities to effectively require their almost total isolation from the rest of the community. As a result, social isolation has been especially acute among the elderly. “The CDC, through the National Academy of Sciences Engineering and Medicine, cites loneliness and social isolation as significantly increasing the risk of premature death, even rivaling risks caused by smoking, obesity and physical inactivity. Pre-existing or not-yet-onset health issues like dementia, heart failure and depression significantly increase as a result of loneliness and social isolation.”²

This paints a rather bleak picture. A San Francisco Bay Area free weekly newspaper, The Pacific Sun, talked about the issue with Executive Director of Solstice Senior Living in Santa Rosa, Mr. Paul Peck. The question is how his and other organizations have made changes in order to meet residents’ needs over the course of the pandemic.

To be sure, it has been a challenge to simply maintain services, with what has become a nationwide struggle to keep staff at these facilities. But, to the extent that Solstice Senior Living – like many other care homes – has succeeded, is attributable to its pivot to greater communication with the community and to find ways to ensure that their residents can engage and connect safely:

¹ Jack, Victor. COVID-19 pandemic cut life expectancy by most since World War Two –study. Reuters. September 26, 2021. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/covid-19-pandemic-cut-life-expectancy-by-most-since-world-war-two-study-2021-09-26/>. Accessed on February 4, 2022.

² Vick, Jane. Senior Care During Covid—How Care Homes and Nonprofits Shifted to Support Elders During the Pandemic. Pacific Sun. January 19, 2022. Available at: <https://pacificsun.com/elder-support-during-covid/>. Accessed on February 4, 2022.

Mr. Peck explained:

Really the main thing was keeping in communication. I put out a memo every seven to 10 days to keep them updated, and meet with them on a monthly basis to update them on the facility's staffing, progress and so on [including details about the pandemic, including changing circumstances and variants]. Keeping the residents up to date as things change helps them feel connected. ...When we finally got everyone their second round of vaccines, in March 2021, we were able to gather in-person again, which was such a lift on people's spirits. And we redid our whole community during the shutdown. ... To return not only to one another, but to a totally redone facility, really boosted their spirits.³

An employee at another Bay Area care home, Spring Lake Village, noted a similar experience with regard to communication:

We had to learn to come up with ways to help our residents, and to stay connected—to teach them everything that we do. I can honestly tell you that seniors are now using cell phones, ipads, computers and email and Zoom meetings who probably never would have otherwise as a source of communication, and that has kept us connected. They're sharp, and I'm constantly surprised at what people can learn. And, truly, the need for connection exploded, so we had to figure out how we could keep people healthy while keeping them connected. And I think we were pretty successful.⁴

It really is no small feat for these care homes to ramp up their communications with residents in the face of staff shortages. To further be able to pivot to provide support to residents so that they can harness the power of technology to safely stay in touch with their loved ones is truly admirable. These efforts have no doubt played an important role in combating pandemic-related isolation among seniors living in care homes.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*