

Nursing Homes That Stepped Up To The Plate During COVID-19



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If you are a director of a post-acute care facility, you are no doubt well-versed on the devastation COVID-19 has wrought on long-term care facilities in the United States and beyond. What you may not have read much about, however, is the nursing homes that handled the pandemic well.

While an article in *The Atlantic* (“The U.S. Is Repeating Its Deadliest Pandemic Mistake”) doesn’t avoid citing grim statistics, it does make reference to nursing homes that have remained coronavirus-free during this pandemic. It also mentions Hong Kong, which reported no deaths from COVID-19 in any of its care homes. This region was particularly well-prepared to deal with a pandemic—in 2003, after the outbreak of SARS, Hong Kong required its nursing homes to have a designated infection-control officer as well as a minimum one-month supply of PPE. When COVID-19 broke out, these nursing homes halted nonurgent hospital trips among residents as well as family visitation, and any resident who caught the virus was isolated in hospital coronavirus wards—not in nursing homes.

It’s not easy to find news stories of American nursing homes that have remained free of COVID-19, but there are a few examples, like that of Vernon Manor in Vernon, Connecticut. After monitoring the global situation, Vernon Manor created a threat analysis to look at weaknesses and strengths. In

late February, more than a week before the first confirmed COVID-19 case in Connecticut, administrators restricted visitors and implemented masking procedures. The administration has also placed air purifying units that deliver continuous air disinfection in high-traffic areas and installed air scrubbers in isolation units. As well, Vernon Manor adjusts its plan when it receives new COVID-19 updates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Public Health. Administrators also meet with staff daily and send out time-sensitive updates to families.

Likewise, the Maryland Baptist Aged in Baltimore, which had a quality assurance infection-control nurse on staff, didn’t wait long to deal with the threat of COVID-19. In late February/early March, the administration locked down the

facility and adopted a rigorous screening process that includes taking temperatures of staff and asking them for “almost an hour-to-hour detail” on what they did when they weren’t working. As with Vernon Manor, this nursing home ordered extra masks early.

Creative Ways To Deal With Isolation

News outlets have reported more frequently on the measures nursing homes are taking to combat social isolation, the unfortunate consequence of cancelling family visits and group activities to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

According to a McKnight’s Long-Term Care News survey, some nursing home leaders have increased the number of activities professionals to help boost the morale of residents. Of course, one of the biggest duties of activities staff (as well as some chaplains) is facilitating now ubiquitous video chats and window visits between residents and their loved ones. Some nursing homes have gotten

inventive by setting up plexiglass visitation cubicles, while others have created booths where residents could safely hug their loved ones.



For Earth Day, staff at St. Mary of the Woods, a nursing facility in Avon, Ohio, created a traveling rain forest for the residents and they planted grass and wildflowers together. On another day, Our Little World Alpacas paraded alpacas around the facility.

Hallway Activities Are Booming

Activities staff are also looking at alternate ways to engage residents. For instance, in one nursing home, residents went on scavenger hunt for items found in magazines, which they then cut out to make collages. In another care home, residents have been given headphones so they can join in on exercise programs. Overall, one of the biggest initiatives has been switching activities from recreational rooms to hallways. According to this blog post from the Joint Commission, nursing homes have taken the following activities out into the hall:

- Bingo
- Exercise programs
- Worship sessions
- Reminiscence groups
- Talent shows
- Sing-alongs and karaoke
- Museum/art gallery and travel virtual tours

Some residents can even take part in remote-control car races or make and fly paper airplanes down the hall. In addition, some activities staff wander through the halls playing guitar.

New Ways To Celebrate

Nursing homes have also had to wrap their heads around celebrating special days during lockdown. In one case, a

musician walked outside the Welcome Nursing Home in Oberlin, Ohio on St. Patrick's Day, playing bagpipes for residents and staff who listened at open windows. "Drive-by" parades were also popular as an alternate way to celebrate Easter, Mother's Day and Father's Day. For instance, this Mother's Day, residents of Sunshine Christian Homes in Holiday, Florida sat on lawns or balconies as family members drove by in cars decorated with balloons, streamers and signs, waving and honking their horns.

In addition to hosting Mother's Day and Easter parades, St. Mary of the Woods, a nursing facility in Avon, Ohio, got particularly inventive. For Earth Day, staff created a traveling rain forest for the residents and they planted grass and wildflowers together. On another day, Our Little World Alpacas paraded alpacas around the facility.

Given that COVID-19 is still surging across large parts of the United States, long-term care facilities will likely need to develop even more inventive activities to keep residents emotionally healthy. Surely with the popularity of these new activities they will keep some of these morale boosters alive even when the lockdown is completely lifted. 🍷

Katherine O'Brien is a freelance writer/editor/ghost-writer in the B2B/ B2C health, aging and non-profit sectors who creates content that engages and educates target audiences and sells brands. She has written about advanced health and medical topics like dementia, cancer and aging for both general audiences as well as healthcare professionals and administrators.



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