

Facilities for seniors find ways to overcome social isolation

By ANDREA DECKERT

The risk of social isolation, a concern for senior citizens even in normal times, has been amplified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, local senior living facilities have found many ways to help residents deal with these challenges, while adhering to safety measures.

They are also helping residents' family members with the adjustment to the new normal.

Senior living facilities in the area are using technology to help with their efforts, including helping residents use tablets and smartphones to FaceTime with family members. There are also welcoming "window visits," which allow families to see their loved ones through the glass.

All are adhering to mandatory social distancing and safety measures with the venerable population, including providing the necessary equipment and training for staff.



Smyth

Nancy Smyth, executive director of the Rochester Presbyterian Home, says the organization has gone back to the basics when it comes to assisting its residents.

"We are focused on making sure our residents are being well cared for, getting plenty of good food and feeling secure," Smyth says.



Chambery

Rochester Presbyterian has three locations in Monroe County and 200 residents, many of which have memory loss.

It has been all-hands on deck, Smyth says, noting administration has been helping with activities.



Bevins

The locations hold spirit days and wear their PH (Presbyterian Home) t-shirts to help keep spirits up. There are also secure areas outdoors for residents who are looking for some fresh air.

Smyth praised staff members for the way they are handling the challenges that come with the pandemic.

She adds that residents' families have been supportive, as well, supplying staff with pizza and donuts, as has the community, which donated face masks to employees.

"We are working to keep things as normal as possible in an abnormal situation," Smyth says. "We hope families feel confident in the care we are providing."

Walter Winiarczyk, administrator at The Highlands at Brighton, says technology has been one of the main ways residents have been communicating with their families. The Highlands at Brighton serves 145 residents.

"Everyone, including families, understands what is happening and are rolling with it," Winiarczyk says, noting that staff is also in regular contact with residents' families.

In addition to FaceTime, email and social media, the facility has been able to utilize services through University of Rochester Medicine to provide tele-psych sessions for residents.

The facility also provides meals and snacks for staff members, who are working hard to care for the residents.

"Any little ways we can say 'thank you' we do," he says.

Joseph Nicholas M.D. is medical director at



The Highlands at Brighton and associate professor of medicine, division of geriatrics, at the University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry.

He says another area of focus at the senior living facility has been helping the staff deal with the stresses and anxieties of today's environment. He says a confident staff trained in dealing with the pandemic can help ease tensions across the facility.

To help meet that objective, The Highlands at Brighton shows short videos to address staff challenges that range from dealing with the stress and anxiety of the global situation to how to decrease the chance of transmitting infection at home.

There are also regular meetings, either in person or virtually, to keep staff up-to-date and informed.

The organization recently launched a video geared for residents' families, as well, which can be found on the facility website, Nicholas says.

Elisa Chambery, administrator for The Living Center at the Highlands of Pittsford, says they, too, are using smartphones and tablets to connect residents with family members. They have also opted for one-on-one activities rather than ones in a large group. The retirement community has 122 residents.

Activities include in-room bingo and musicians strolling the hallways. The facility has also increased its social work presence.

Chambery notes that the staff, as well as the families of residents, have risen to the occasion and are navigating the changes that have come as a result of the pandemic.

"Everyone realizes these are different times," Chambery says, noting that staffers are the game changers when it comes to caring for the residents. "Our staff are our heroes."

Paul Preston, vice president of DePaul Senior Living, says that though circumstances may keep families apart physically, they are not keeping the organization's seniors from connecting with loved ones.

"Phone calls or handwritten letters are being welcomed and family members are being encouraged to call to schedule video chats utilizing computers, smartphones and tablets," Preston says.

DePaul has senior living facilities throughout New York, North Carolina and South Carolina.

DePaul has also been accepting donations of homemade masks on Facebook and celebrating hope, help and everyday heroes on its

social media pages with the #DePaulStrong hashtag, he adds.

"Our primary concern is clearly about the health and well-being of the individuals we serve and our dedicated DePaul staff members," he says.

Meghan Bevins, director of therapeutic recreation for Jewish Senior Life, says the one-on-one connections staffers are making with residents as a result of the pandemic have had some bright spots.

Jewish Senior Life has 600 residents and 1,100 employees on a campus that provides all levels of senior living, from independent apartments to assisted living and skilled nursing.

"Everyone has really pulled together, and we have been able to connect in a way we never did before," Bevins says.

The organization has Facetime calls seven days a week and recently implemented a window program that allows family members to connect with residents over the phone while seeing them through the window. In the first couple of days, there were nearly 40 window visits.

There is dedicated email for families to send pictures, videos and notes that can be shared with residents. There is also a pen pal program with youth in the Rochester community, she adds.



Photo provided

A Jewish Senior Life resident enjoys a FaceTime call.

Administrative staff, from marketing to accounting, participate in an adopt a neighborhood program, where each take a section of the campus and devote one-on-one time with the residents who live there.

Jewish Senior Life also has an internal television channel for residents that runs from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Programming includes exercise sessions, movies and streaming of local musicians, including those with the Hochstein School of Music.

Other activities include a campus-wide happy hour, a la carte art and an active residents' council that has continued through resident surveys and televised updates.

A priority is also placed on meeting the residents' spiritual needs, says Michele Schirano, senior vice president and administrator of the Jewish Home.

Earlier this month, Jewish Senior Life held a virtual Passover Seder that included video clips of clergy and residents. Some 80 residents participated and it was broadcast across the campus.

"We are engaging the residents and are having fun while we do it," Bevins says, adding that residents are handling the changes well. "The focus is on highlighting meaning, purpose and joy for our residents."

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