

FIVE PREDICTIONS for Senior Living in 2021

By Dr. Jacquelyn Kung, Robert G. Kramer and Ed Frauenheim

No industry was hit harder by COVID-19 in 2020 than senior living.

But leaders can turn the corner in 2021. The immediate need is to prevent additional infections and make communities safe, in part through effective distribution of the new vaccines. But even as senior living executives manage the ongoing crisis, they must build the future. In fact, the pandemic provides a perfect opportunity to renew the mission of senior living.

We predict five trends will be critical in 2021.

Will your organization seize the moment?



Digital Transformation—at Last

1

Our industry has lagged behind most when it comes to technology. This is no longer an option. The COVID crisis showed that assisted living properties, independent living communities, and skilled nursing facilities must have cutting-edge digital systems for three purposes.

PEACE OF MIND

Residents must be able to communicate from their rooms with facility staff and with family members, even amid lockdowns. Not just audio connections, but video links that prove loved ones are Ok.

CARE DELIVERY

What used to be “way out there” has become normal. Doctors and other health professionals can use videoconferencing and other tools to diagnose and monitor residents. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is not only paying for telehealth—CMS is encouraging it.

CONNECTION

COVID taught us that physical distancing cannot become social isolation. When disease outbreaks require residents to remain in their rooms, digital activities must replace in-person gatherings. The alternative is depression, aggravated health conditions and rapid decline.



2

Onsite Healthcare Delivery—with Partners

Healthcare at many senior living communities has long amounted to a van shuttling residents to the doctor's office or an ambulance ferrying sick residents to the hospital. But this approach caused fear during COVID, given the risks of contracting the disease in hospital settings.



Residents and families will not stand for such physical outsourcing of care anymore. And there is another way. Healthcare services can be delivered onsite where seniors live.

The key is partnerships. During the pandemic, many senior living organizations forged relationships with local providers, who sent healthcare professionals into assisted and independent living communities. Those same providers can offer remote, digital care to residents as technology systems improve.

3

Trust through Transparency—and Data

Besides elderly Americans dying by the tens of thousands, another casualty of COVID has been trust in senior living organizations. The industry’s black eye isn’t entirely fair. COVID is most lethal to those over 75 with underlying health conditions, which describes the overwhelming majority of senior living residents. What’s more, the media sometimes lumps together outdated and overwhelmed nursing homes with upscale independent living complexes.



Still, leading senior living providers will proactively rebuild confidence among residents, family members and the public. Transparency is key.

Any company with a congregate living setting has to be willing to publish real-time information on such matters as COVID infection rates, and deaths, risk mitigation protocols, employee vaccination practices and staffing policies.

Workplace Culture and Servant Leadership—at the Fore

Too many companies in the industry treat workplace culture as a “soft” “nice to have.” That’s a risky approach today. Data from Activated Insights and Great Place to Work shows that the Best Workplaces in Aging Services have lower turnover rates and better care outcomes.

4

During the COVID pandemic, reliable staffing and sound care have been more critical than ever. Not only to get sick residents needed treatment, but to avoid instances of neglect that ruin reputations.

A great culture is one where staff members feel pride, experience camaraderie and trust leaders. To cultivate that trust, managers and executives must practice “servant leadership”—seeing yourself not as the “superior” but the kind of boss who will step in to serve meals and unclog toilets as well as to address the family concerns staff often bring with them to work. Humility is the new superpower.



A New Story for Senior Living—and Society Overall

5

In recent decades, our industry has gravitated to a message focused on caregiving. We’ve lost our aspirational north star—that residents in our communities have much to contribute and can feel deeply alive in their later years. COVID gives us a chance to reframe our value proposition and mission.

The new story for senior living has to be about meaning, human connection and community in addition to care. This means redefining our activity directors as “purpose matchmakers,” breaking down the walls that make our complexes a form of “senior apartheid” and looking for language that moves us away from the “declinist” narrative of old-age.



We can turn outside our industry for help. Even as COVID devastated many of our senior communities, it caused young people to empathize in new ways with their older neighbors. And elders are a vital resource to help America recover from COVID—already, they are servicing as tutors to help close education gaps that have widened during the pandemic.

Indeed, with hope for an end to the COVID nightmare growing amid vaccinations, senior living can prompt a polarized country to wake up to its sense of interdependence and mutual aid.

The year 2021 is an opportunity for us to renew our calling as an industry, and to help heal our nation.



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