

In this Industry Update you will discover:

1. "Senior Living Industry Cautiously Hopeful about Biden's COVID Response Strategy"
- **MCKNIGHT'S SENIOR LIVING NEWS, 1/25/2021; pg. 1**
2. "Some Senior Living Operators Add Vaccine Access to Marketing Toolkits to Help Rebuild Occupancy"
- **MCKNIGHT'S SENIOR LIVING NEWS, 1/25/2021; pg. 2**
3. "Most Older Adults Optimistic about COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout but Want More Information: Survey"
- **MCKNIGHT'S SENIOR LIVING NEWS, 1/25/2021; pg. 5**
4. "Senior Living Covid-19 Testing Innovations Continue as Vaccines Roll Out"
- **SENIOR HOUSING NEWS, 1/15/2021; pg. 6**



Senior Living Industry Cautiously Hopeful about Biden's COVID Response Strategy

Written by: Lois A. Bowers

1/25/2021

The U.S. Defense, Health and Human Services, and Veterans Affairs secretaries, along with other federal government agencies and officials, will work together to provide targeted surge assistance to assisted living communities and other long-term care facilities under President Joe Biden's new ["National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness."](#)

It's one of several provisions in the strategy, released Thursday, Biden's first full day in office, that senior living industry groups are cautiously cheering.

"While there are still logistical questions to be answered, we remain hopeful this means communities will begin to see increased resources and support for testing, treatments, PPE, and staffing," Argentum President and CEO James Balda said. "This support, along with added financial relief, is critically needed still nearly a year into the pandemic. Older adults and those who care for them need to remain prioritized, both operationally and in upcoming relief legislation."

Balda said that Argentum appreciates other aspects of the plan as well.

"Specifically, we are pleased to see emphasis on improving the country's vaccination plan and the proposed expansion of the Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care Program," he said. "With that expansion, however, it is imperative that those in senior congregate care settings continue to be prioritized. This includes both seniors — regardless of care level — and those caring for them, in order to maximize vaccine effectiveness."

LeadingAge also said it welcomed the new administration's immediate efforts to prioritize COVID-19 and called for a specific emphasis on older adults and their care providers, whom they said have been the most negatively affected by the coronavirus.

“This virus has raged out of control for nearly a year while our community has desperately called for help. So to have the new administration lay out plans on Day One to put COVID at the top of its agenda is welcome and hopeful news,” LeadingAge President and CEO Katie Smith Sloan said.

LeadingAge, she added, hopes that the plan “means the cavalry is coming, especially on testing and vaccine initiatives.”

Sloan also said that the plan’s proposal to provide 100,000 COVID-19 contact tracers, community health workers and public health nurses focused on pandemic response “is a welcome step in the right direction.”

“We look forward to working with the administration and Congress to ensure that the government prioritizes and addresses the needs of millions of older Americans who account for the vast majority of coronavirus deaths — and on a broader agenda to build a new beginning for older Americans,” she said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Thursday said that Democrats will be prepared to act on Biden’s proposed [\\$1.9 trillion stimulus package](#) in the first week of February.



Some Senior Living Operators Add Vaccine Access to Marketing Toolkits to Help Rebuild Occupancy

Written by: Kimberly Bonvissuto

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As the COVID-19 pandemic sends occupancy rates [plummeting](#) in senior living communities, some operators are adding vaccine access to their marketing toolbox in a bid to entice prospective residents and fill vacant units. One marketing professional, however, urges communities to proceed with caution, calling the approach “a little dangerous.”

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [recommendations](#) put staff members and residents of assisted living communities and nursing homes in the top-priority group to be vaccinated against COVID-19, and many communities have enrolled in the voluntary federal Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care, which follows the CDC guidance, to administer those vaccines.

Atria Senior Living already has lowered fees and offered free rent to attract residents. When access to the COVID-19 vaccine became the number one question from both professional referral sources and consumers, Sanela Graziose, executive vice president of sales, marketing and communications, said the company created a [vaccine tracker](#) on its website. It was intended for existing customers but wound up becoming a resource for prospective residents.

“It became the most pressing question,” Graziose said, adding that Atria’s more than 160 U.S. communities have

seen a pickup in inquiries since the vaccines launched. “We pivoted our existing marketing to really just include those terms and conditions and whether you still could be eligible to be part of a clinic as a new resident.”

Atria also launched a [“Sleeve Up Atria”](#) campaign to educate residents, family members and employees about the vaccines and to combat misinformation. The campaign included community launch events, a website, a video, posters and social media posts. Graziose said Atria has vaccinated more than 7,000 residents in 71 clinics so far.

The final piece

Vancouver, WA-based JEA Senior Living promoted free vaccinations to new residents who moved into a community before Dec. 31, 2020. Chris Jones, an administrator at the organization’s Cinco Ranch, in Katy, TX, said his stand-alone memory care community saw a record eight move-ins in December thanks to the campaign.

“One couple was living at home — they live in another city, but their family lived here. Their family wanted them closer by,” Jones said of a recent move-in. “Their daughter-in-law kept mentioning they were concerned about COVID, living at home, and caregivers who were coming and going.”

Jones said the family was sold on the prospect of having access to the vaccine rather than having to “stand in a line somewhere with thousands of other seniors and risk running out of the vaccine.”

The community just had its second vaccination clinic through the federal Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care, with a third clinic scheduled for mid-February. Jones and Patty Cresap, community resource director, said they continue to promote the availability of vaccines as a marketing tool

With the lifting of restrictions on family visitation, Cresap said, the community has seen a spike in interest. When she mentions the availability of vaccination, it can be the final piece that motivates someone to become a resident.

Informative advertising

Oakmont Senior Living started seeing an increasing number of move-ins after running television ads touting vaccine access. Crystal Robinson, chief marketing officer, said the Irvine, CA-based senior living company has received “overwhelmingly positive” feedback about the campaign.

“The pandemic is top-of-mind for everyone, especially seniors, and we wanted to inform the community that vaccination of senior housing residents is a priority,” Robinson told *McKnight’s Senior Living*.

But she said “word of mouth” advertising about the company’s COVID-19 safety practices also has factored into increased interest.

“Oakmont raced to gain knowledge, implement best practices and expand the team to meet residents’ needs,” Robinson said.

Eclipse Senior Living, a Lake Oswego, OR-based manager of independent living, assisted living and memory care communities under the Elmcroft, Embark and Evoke brands, similarly launched an advertising campaign promising early vaccines “before millions of others” for new residents.

‘A little dangerous’

Derek Dunham, vice president of client services for Varsity, a Pennsylvania-based senior living marketing and

sales agency, said that enticing new residents with the promise of a vaccine by a specific date could be “a little dangerous,” however. Some vaccine clinics are being moved, and some clinics have run out of the vaccines needed to complete a clinic, according to anecdotal reports, he said.

“I’m hearing through discussions there are a lot of moving parts,” Dunham said. “If they can confidently do it and they can legitimately do it, then I think it could be a great hook for people to try to bring them in, but there are other ways to do it.”

At its weekly Varsity Roundtable Project, which brings together sales and marketing professionals to talk about marketing during a pandemic, Dunham said discussion has indicated that some senior living clients are partnering with local pharmacies to provide COVID-19 vaccination clinics on site for the general public.

And although the topic of marketing access to vaccines has come up in the discussions, Varsity has not worked directly with a community that has taken such a bold approach, he said.

Transparency around infection control and safety protocols is the top interest of prospective residents — now more than ever, Dunham said.

“Questions are going to come up for quite some time, if not years, about, ‘What are you doing to keep residents safe?’ ” he said. “That will forever be a talking point — perhaps a section on the website, perhaps a paragraph in a brochure. Infection control and prevention and protection will always be something that will be on peoples’ minds for the next generation or two, given what we’ve been through.”

Informing decisions

In the meantime, to try to combat misinformation and vaccine hesitancy, the American Health Care Association / National Center for Assisted Living’s [#GetVaccinated campaign](#) encourages residents, families and staff members to get vaccinated. The campaign also provides information to help people make informed decisions about vaccination.

“This national effort also helps facilities celebrate when vaccines are administered to residents and caregivers, which providers may use to demonstrate to potential customers,” a spokesperson for the organizations told *McKnight’s Senior Living*.

Additionally, [LeadingAge](#) and [Argentum](#) have created COVID-10 vaccine information and resource web pages. And the CDC has created a [long-term care facility toolkit](#) to help providers prepare for their COVID-19 vaccination clinics.

(New article on next page)

Most Older Adults Optimistic about COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout but Want More Information: Survey

Written by: Kimberly Bonvissuto

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A majority (70%) of adults aged 65 or more years are optimistic about the rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations, but they also don't believe they have enough information about when (58%) and where (59%) they will be able to get vaccinated, according to the latest [KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor Poll](#).

Although the majority of this priority population reported being optimistic, the poll, conducted Jan. 11 to 18, also found that 53% of older adults were frustrated, 33% were confused, 23% were angry and 41% were satisfied about the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Assisted living communities and skilled nursing facilities have been able to participate voluntarily in the federal Pharmacy Partnership for Long-Term Care program, but older adults who are outside of that program or who are living in other congregate settings or at home have not been prioritized for vaccination, and many have had to find out on their own how to get vaccinated.

The older adults surveyed said that their state government is doing a fair job (35%) or a good job (25%) of distributing COVID-19 vaccines in their states. The majority (48%) also said they think that vaccine distribution will improve under the Biden administration, whereas 34% said that it will stay the same.

The poll also found that most surveyed essential workers, another high-priority group, believe that they have enough information about *where* to get a vaccine (55%) but do not have enough information about *when* they will be able to get vaccinated (55%). This group included some healthcare workers who have yet to be vaccinated, who said they don't have enough information about when they will be able to get vaccinated (21%).

Among the broader public, most (66%) also said they feel "optimistic" that the vaccination process will get better. But those who have not yet been vaccinated say they do not have enough information about when people in their priority groups will be able to get a vaccine (60%) or where they can get a vaccine (55%).

At the same time, half (50%) of the general public said they are "frustrated," a third (33%) said they feel "confused," and almost a fourth (23%) said they are "angry."

Black and Hispanic adults, as well as low-income households, are among the groups least likely to say they have enough information. Within each group, at least two-thirds say that they do not have enough information about when they can get vaccinated, and at least 6 in 10 say they don't have enough information about where to get vaccinated.

The findings highlight a challenge facing public health officials working to get vaccines into the arms of priority populations, according to the report.

“The Biden administration has been left with a huge challenge on vaccine administration. Most Americans don’t know when or where they can get a vaccine, including older Americans, who are already eligible to get a vaccine in a growing number of states,” KFF President and CEO Drew Altman said. “Understandably large numbers of people are frustrated, angry and confused.”

SENIOR HOUSING NEWS

Senior Living Covid-19 Testing Innovations Continue as Vaccines Roll Out

Written by: Tim Regan

1/15/2021

Senior living providers are still devoting considerable time and resources to Covid-19 testing, even as they ramp up vaccination efforts for residents and staff.

The senior living industry [made great strides early in the pandemic](#) to bring Covid-19 tests into their communities. But nearly a year into the Covid-19 pandemic, providers are still implementing new and forward-thinking ways to test residents and staff for the novel coronavirus.

These efforts include Juniper Communities and a partner company using artificial intelligence to pinpoint high-risk residents and prioritize them for testing; pool testing strategies from Kisco Senior Living that help limit the disease’s spread during outbreaks; and a new initiative from GenCare Lifestyle to help source and process rapid test kits.

Some of these initiatives aren’t cheap, and the [costs associated with testing](#) are compounded by [lower revenue and compressed margins](#) across the industry as a result of the pandemic. But providers must stay vigilant regarding Covid-19 outbreaks, even as residents and staff get their shots. That is partly to do with the fact that it’s still unclear whether getting vaccinated prevents someone from carrying and spreading Covid-19, according to Juniper CEO Lynne Katzmann.

“One of the reasons we will continue to test is to learn that, and to protect our residents and team members from any spread,” Katzmann told Senior Housing News.

AI assistance

Early on in the pandemic, Bloomfield, New Jersey-based Juniper Communities was among the first senior living providers to advocate for widespread, frequent Covid-19 testing.

Months later, the [company began working](#) with Oakland, California-based machine-learning algorithm company Dascena, with an overall goal of finding new ways to innovate and streamline the testing process. Now, that effort is bearing fruit in the form of a newly launched, algorithm-driven Covid-19 testing strategy.

Juniper already tests residents and staff for Covid-19 frequently to detect new outbreaks. In the past, that process involved monitoring every resident and staff member and applying the same infection control measures universally.

Recently, Juniper began using a simple cheek swab test with Dascena's help to detect Covid-19. In addition to testing residents for Covid-19, Juniper also now collects demographic information such as age, sex and place of residence. That information is then analyzed by Dascena's algorithm, which was originally developed to detect sepsis before it found applications during the Covid-19 pandemic.

By using Dascena's technology along with regular testing, Juniper can get a better read on which of its residents have the highest risk for hospitalization, and stratify them into low-, medium- and high-risk categories. That helps the company allocate testing resources and time during a period when both can be in short supply.

"If you fall into the medium- or high-risk area, we can do more testing, we can segregate people, and we can tell them what we've learned," Katzmann said. "And while we can't tell them what to do, we can make it clear that the data suggests that they would be a good candidate for early vaccination."

In addition to the testing initiative, Juniper and Dascena also worked together to create a new documentation and reporting portal and workflow, an effort that reduced indirect costs associated with testing. The companies are also working on new ways to implement artificial intelligence and machine learning in the future.

Although Katzmann does think providers will be able to slow down their regular testing efforts once more is known about Covid-19 and how it spreads, some of these initiatives can still serve providers well when dealing with seasonal epidemics down the road.

Rapid results

GenCare, which operates six senior living communities in Washington's Puget Sound area, recently launched a new rapid testing initiative for detecting Covid-19 or influenza in as little as 15 to 30 minutes.

The program, undertaken with CAIPHI, Inc., uses Quidel antigen tests purported to have an accuracy rate of between 95% and 99%. The tests are administered by CAIPHI EP Testing's mobile testing teams and screen for both Covid-19 along with Influenza A and B. Neither GenCare nor its residents pay for the program, and CAIPHI is reimbursed for the cost of testing through Medicare and CARES Act funding.

GenCare created dedicated apartments for Covid-19 testing at each of its six communities. The apartments are equipped with a Quidel Sofia 2 testing device and a rapid diagnostic system for infectious disease testing.

The provider will use the rapid tests in a variety of ways. For example, new residents are tested before they move in and required to isolate for 14 days. To ease the quarantine period for new residents, GenCare offers a "Staycation" program marketed as "two weeks of pampering, luxury and personalized community introduction activities."

GenCare also plans to test visitors when they are allowed back into the communities. Under that process, visitors will wait in the community's dedicated testing apartment until they receive a negative test result.

For staff, GenCare will offer the rapid tests on a staggered schedule that tests one-third of the company's employees every two days. And GenCare will test residents for Covid-19 under the program at least once a week.

Like Katzmann, GenCare CEO Leon Grundstein believes that robust testing is necessary until there is more information available on the vaccine. But he also believes that the company's testing program will be useful even after the pandemic winds down, as the industry will always grapple with smaller seasonal epidemics like influenza.

“It also tests for influenza, so we can manage that issue, which has always been a significant factor,” Grundstein told SHN. “We’d like to incorporate this somehow in our normal procedures.”

Pool testing

Other providers have relied on forward-thinking organizational strategies to stop the spread of Covid-19 in their communities. For example, Carlsbad, California-based provider Kisco Senior Living is using rapid “pooled” Covid-19 testing, a process that is similar to testing strategies adopted by the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Hockey League (NHL).

Under that strategy, Kisco regularly collects and tests saliva samples for Covid-19 — once a week for residents who haven’t left the community, and twice for residents who left the community that week along with staff. A negative test for the pool means that no one in the group is infected with Covid-19, while a positive test means at least one person in the group has contracted it.

Because pools are arranged in either 50- or 100-person groups, Kisco can more quickly isolate an outbreak and trace an infection to the source. But doing so is pricey, and Kisco spends \$100,000 a month on pool testing alone.

Using pooled testing has allowed Kisco to spot outbreaks early. For example, the company’s process is sensitive enough to detect positive results even before the infected person has shown any symptoms, or even when the virus is in miniscule amounts, according to Ed Ward, vice president of operations for Kisco.

“We’re able to identify them very early, so it’s reduced the amount of big outbreaks in our communities by detecting the presence of Covid,” Ward told SHN.

Kisco plans to reevaluate how it handles testing once all of its communities have completed their Covid-19 vaccine clinics, a process that is still ongoing. What Kisco’s testing strategy looks like in the future depends on how the vaccine affects the spread of the coronavirus, and whether residents and staff get vaccinated in sufficient numbers. But, Ward believes the need to test will linger well after the vaccines are flowing freely.

“We’re going to have to continue to keep some testing, because there are going to be some individuals that aren’t going to get vaccinated for personal reasons, religious reasons, anaphylaxis or severe allergy concerns, and others,” Ward said. “But I think we can look at some modifications [to testing], as long as certain thresholds of vaccine participation are met.”