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**SUCCEEDING IN A
POST-COVID WORLD
ONE UNVACCINATED
CONVERT AT A TIME**

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After “Operation Warp Speed” began winding down in the early months of 2021 and nursing homes breathed a well-earned sigh of relief as COVID-19 cases and deaths slowed dramatically, legions of leaders and administrators learned the hard way that the biggest battles may still lie ahead.

Not battles over rebuilding lost census or some kind of perceived pre-COVID “normal.”

Instead, Principle LTC President and CEO Lynn Hood and her fellow nursing home administrators found themselves bravely battling moving targets with the ebb and flow of new and existing unvaccinated residents and workers. If there were an “end game,” for now it’s called “herd immunity,” a critical mass of the fully vaccinated that will convince science and the CDC it’s once again safe to declare an end to this iteration of COVID.

As Hood and her team have learned, the job ahead is not for the weak of heart and will require a level of smarts and dedication as unprecedented as the virus itself.

To Hood, the journey ahead is a worthy opponent, an improvisational three-handed juggling act, something she and her peers around the country got a preview of near the end of an early pandemic planning phone call with Dr. Anthony Fauci, when someone reminded the group they were “building the engine while flying the plane.”

As Hood explained in a May 2021 webinar, “Vaccinations and quality — where do we go from here?” Principle LTC’s benchmark-worthy efforts included enlisting



Providers say they are in a race to achieve herd immunity in their communities.

and engaging everyone — from receptionists and housekeepers to nursing directors and the C-suite. They required conceiving and implementing a massive corporate-wide education and orientation campaign while simultaneously developing and acquiring tools to train, track and analyze vaccination progress.

Even today, on-the-fly make-buy decisions are one of the hallmarks of Principle LTC’s lauded and successful response to meeting all of the myriad challenges of COVID head on.

Everyone knew at the start that this was not a one-off, as Hood explained in detailing her organization’s response. And as she demonstrated in painstaking detail, every provider can achieve similar results with the right blend of courage and perseverance.

THE GAME-CHANGER

In early fall of 2020, nursing homes had reason to celebrate as they watched their share of COVID

deaths begin to tumble.

Principle LTC seemed to be doing all of the right things. It overcame many of the PPE supply issues, upgraded its air filtration systems, implemented restrictive visitation policies and felt increased confidence that local hospitals and physicians were using all of the advanced protocols utilizing antivirals, monoclonal antibodies and anti-clotting treatments.

Anticipating the impending nationwide vaccine rollout, Principle LTC leaders got some unwelcome news in November, however, after surveying employees about their willingness to accept immunization.

“We were pretty alarmed when we learned that only 18% of our employees would actually be willing to get the vaccine,” Hood said.

The following month, she and her clinicians watched the nationwide COVID death numbers rise to their highest levels. Much could be attributed to holiday pressures

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Successful providers will mount campaigns against misinformation, experts say.

from both residents and their families. But even more indicative would be outer-community spread of the virus, where social distancing and safety precautions were more lightly followed.

THE BIRTH OF PRINCIPLE PROTECTS®

Out of that emerged Principle Protects®, a branded multifaceted education and public awareness campaign to promote COVID vaccinations.

Before rolling out the program, Hood asked John Lue, Principle LTC's chief medical consultant, to conduct calls with all the company's medical group directors to enlist their support and solicit ideas.

The company also developed a vaccine hotline to field employees' concerns and questions, and a dedicated website for Principle Protects to showcase all of the messaging around the initiative, provide updated resources and FAQs, an electronic bulletin board,

toolkits, important dates and posters promoting awareness and vaccine clinic promotions.

The initiative is now a permanent part at Principle LTC.

MASTERING COMMUNICATION MEDIA

A significant reason for the program's success was not only its ubiquity, but the media it used to convey and reinforce messaging — from slide presentations, mobile notifications and information apps to mini-movies, dozens of informative videos accessible on the Principle Protects website or delivered through QR codes in printed and online materials.

One of the most powerful videos showcased top executives getting their first vaccine shots. Hood said she felt it was important to showcase the diversity of its executive leadership and reinforce the company's dedication to diversity while drawing attention

to the high level of vaccine hesitancy among minorities.

The clip ended with Hood saying, "Although I know this vaccine will protect me and my loved ones today, our team is doing this for you. We trust the science. We need you, your fellow coworkers and our communities to step up and protect each other."

Digital messaging also has been an integral part of the program's overall communication strategy for reaching the company's 5,000-plus employees.

Inspired by the effectiveness of using soothing music and video clips, as well as animation, to calm visitors at theme park attractions like Disney and Universal, videos promoting vaccine awareness and other kinds of vignettes also are playing constantly at every vaccine station and other places on Principle LTC campuses.

Behind so much of the visual medium was an overt effort to educate the unvaccinated. In one video, Lue reinforces the efficacy and safety records of the available vaccines while dispelling fears about the speed at which they were developed. The video is delivered with a level of bluntness and transparency that seems to have been well-received, Hood noted.

Various fact sheets were developed and disseminated online and in person. One of them, a COVID-19 vaccine fact sheet, attempted to dispel some misinformation around the vaccines' origin.

"As we engaged with our teams in the field, we heard many instances of fear or concern about

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the vaccines themselves, one of which was a popular notion that the vaccines were not American made,” said Max Mason, senior vice president, strategy and ops support. “So I did my research and put together a fact sheet that pointed out that the predominant ones were, in fact, manufactured in the United States.”

Managing this volume of data across 46 facilities required a Herculean effort. Managing it well was an absolute necessity given the fluidity of the vaccination efforts and the changing science around the COVID virus.

There were some minor, and a few major, hiccups. Some concerned offloading data from individual facilities while others involved clinic scheduling snafus. Many of the issues were resolved by centralizing the data in a cloud-based center, as well as SharePoint, an information exchange platform.

ASSESSING THE FIRST VACCINATION ROUND

Principle LTC’s vaccination clinics through Walgreens and CVS lasted 92 days — from Dec. 21,

2020, through March 22, 2021. All told, 3,045 residents were vaccinated (a 97% benchmark). Of the total 2,342 full- and part-time employees vaccinated, 50% were fully vaccinated. Among the full-time employees alone, the fully vaccinated reach 68%.

Principle LTC’s pharmacy services provider, Neil Medical Group, now manages the vaccine administration.

Since Walgreens and CVS departed, Principle has added more than 2,700 new residents and replaced or added more than 530 employees. The company’s data management efforts continue to adjust the numbers as new vaccinations are administered, Hood said.

PRESERVING THE MOMENTUM

Hood and her residents and employees now have come to accept one irrefutable fact: “COVID will probably be around for the rest of our lives,” she said. “But hopefully it will be in a much more controllable form.”

For now, the herd immunity goal

is 90/70 — 90% of residents and 70% of employees vaccinated.

The company continues to explore other ways to inspire or convince the unvaccinated, including time off with pay, bonuses, raffles, even friendly competitions between different campuses. All while executives continue pondering the fluidity of their 90/70 herd immunity threshold.

As Principle LTC inched ever closer to herd immunity, a second well-earned collective breath arrived.

“This task before us has worked because we had to leave all of our egos at the door,” Hood said. “We had to understand the importance of grace because this has been a very stressful time. We tried to deliver all of our messages as honestly as possible. We forced ourselves into calmness even when there wasn’t a calm day to be had. We used what I call ‘the Goldilocks approach’ to communication. We wanted to make sure that we didn’t give too much communication or too little. Just enough for people to be able to manage the outbreaks in their buildings without being overwhelmed with information.”

In the end, Hood still believes in a mantra she’s carried most of her career in long-term care: “If you take care of the people who take care of the patients, a lot of things will take care of themselves.” ■

The webinar was sponsored by HealthDirect Pharmacy Services.



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— Lynn Hood, Principle LTC

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