



WORKFORCE LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

9 WAYS COVID-19 CHANGED LONG-TERM CARE



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Long-term care leaders implemented a variety of tactics to offer support as stress and burnout from the coronavirus pandemic set in for staff members. And although spa days, “hero pay” and dinners were appreciated, “loving on your people” was the most important move, according to industry leaders.

“If you love on them, they give that loving care as well,” Kimberly Green-Yates, chief operating officer of Diakonos Group, shared during a Paycor-sponsored roundtable during the 2021 *McKnight's Women of Distinction Awards and Forum*. Diakonos, as did many other providers, took care of staff members by taking care of their families through childcare, transportation, meals and mental health support, Green-Yates added.

All of the panelists at the event, moderated by *McKnight's Senior Living* Editor Lois A. Bowers, were *McKnight's Women of Distinction* honorees.

FIGHT FATIGUE

“COVID fatigue is very, very real,” Avanti Senior Living Chief Operating Officer Lori Alford said, adding that although many people had to transition to children completing school classes at home and spouses losing their jobs, senior living and skilled nursing workers experienced those issues on top of needing to show up for work and deal with COVID-19. “There is going to be a lot of trauma from this for years to come,” Alford added.

Avanti implemented mental wellness training for its department heads, including a



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six-week online course and group discussions, during the pandemic. Participants learned how to be mindful and intentional about their thoughts, Alford said.

COMMUNICATE

Communication was another important component of supporting staff members during the pandemic. Alford said she learned to move beyond carefully edited responses “wrapped up in a pretty red bow” and speak from the heart. Unfiltered, honest messages that shared her fear and helplessness during the height of the crisis “spoke volumes to everyone in the organization.”

“That was one of the major leadership lessons I’ve had in my career,” Alford said. “Sometimes a well-crafted, perfect message isn’t what they need. What they need is the real, raw truth so they can trust you and follow you.”

BE FLEXIBLE

Flexibility also became important

for workers dealing with children, spouses and parents at home.

“We have truly become a flexible organization, which is not easy when you’re maintaining schedules for 29 facilities,” American Health Partners Chief Operating Officer Robin Bradley said, adding that employee engagement leads to quality care.

Alicia Hartnett, director of health care and assisted living for The Lutheran Village at Miller’s Grant, agreed.

“When you have happy team members, when your team members are well taken care of, it directly translates into the care the residents receive,” she said. “It’s a huge correlation when you can have satisfied team members and go the extra mile to let them know they’re supported. It’s a direct correlation to quality care.”

RESPOND QUICKLY

Although the senior living and care industry is not known for its ability to quickly change, Green-Yates



Marketing teams learned how to embrace technology.

said, she was pleasantly surprised to learn how agile her organization could be in a crisis.

“We had no idea how great we could be and how well our teams could come together until something like this happened,” she said. “We became very agile and quick in our responses.

“We learned such great lessons about being excellent team members, working together, and identifying strengths and weaknesses quickly,” Green-Yates added.

Many processes and procedures adopted during the pandemic, she said, will carry forward into the future. Green-Yates said she remembers having a moment during the pandemic when she and her chief nursing officer asked, “Why weren’t we doing that before?” particularly when it came to infection control procedures.

“Some things will have a ripple effect through the company,” she said. “Our ability to be as agile as we are now, our ability to identify root causes quickly and adjust on

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infection control, which affects us everyday — those are very exciting things to add to our space.”

KEEP SALES PERSON-CENTERED

Alford and Bradley said that moves to adapt their sales and marketing efforts also are keepers.

“We had to completely reinvent ourselves in our outreach — how we connect with consumers, how to relationship-build,” Alford

said. “We learned that we can’t take human touch away from our industry.”

But, she added, they also learned that not everyone wants to come into a building, and communities have to adapt to the individual comfort levels of potential residents and their families.

“COVID validated that the consumer is shifting,” Alford said. “We learned a lot of things along the way that we wouldn’t ever have explored if we didn’t have the pandemic to deal with. We learned how to connect and build relationships beyond what we already were doing.”

EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY

Bradley said her marketing team learned to embrace technology, including virtual tours, enhanced websites, Zoom calls and digital communication with families.

“Those types of communications will be part of our home forever,” she said.

Technology also helped the company support its employees, Bradley said. For example, she said, digital televisions telling stories about employee recognition, email messages coming from the top, and apps allowing access to schedules and paychecks were helpful in providing support for its workforce.

“The way we communicate, how often we communicate, how important it is for our facilities to hear from us on a constant basis, being flexible with them, and understanding their family issues have become the heart

of how we're trying to reach our employees and staff," Bradley said.

IT'S OK TO BE UNCOMFORTABLE

Hartnett said her leadership team adopted the mantra of "getting comfortable with being uncomfortable."

"This isn't anything any of us have ever gone through. What will continue is the support our leadership team had for one another," she said. "Everyone from the front line staff to leadership to the C-suite — everyone was willing to help out whenever they can. It will change our mindset and the industry moving forward."

OFFER EDUCATION

Several providers already offer education and advancement opportunities, but roundtable participants said that interest in those opportunities was heightened as employees assumed new roles and responsibilities during the pandemic.

Green-Yates said her organization has the ability to send people to school to become administrators, chefs, nurses or nurse practitioners.

"The staff who stepped through this misery with us and fought with us everyday, it gave them a renewed faith in themselves as well," she said. "They're here because they really love this industry, and they want to see what they want to do next. This gives us the opportunity as leaders to take those superstars and start educating them on opportunities."

The organization has a renewed

focus to be successful at all levels, Green-Yates added.

Bradley said that several employees became nursing assistants by taking advantage of emergency waiver training programs. Workers from dietary and housekeeping departments saw a need in their communities and stepped up to help, she added, and in skilled nursing, staff members also took the chance to add new certifications to their resumes.

"It builds competency and excellence and confidence," Bradley said, adding that the educational opportunity is available to any staff member.

Hartnett said her organization always encourages people to better themselves, because it also benefits the organization.

"We encourage people to grow and get additional certifications," she said. "It's more useful to organizations to have that additional knowledge base."

RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES REMAIN

Although staffing challenges were top of mind pre-COVID, Alford said that stimulus checks, unemployment and other factors created "a whole new beast" in recruitment challenges as the country headed into the pandemic recovery phase.

Those challenges, she added, are coupled with a whole different generation coming onto the employment lines.

"In healthcare, we like to do what we've always done," she said, referring to schedules and set

times. Today's worker, however, she said, is a gig worker who likes variety. "They're not proud of longevity the way some older folks are in the workforce," Alford noted.

Green-Yates added that she took her message of opportunities in the industry to her community, leveraging news organizations to advertise the availability of jobs during a time when many individuals were losing their jobs.

More than 2,000 people applied for positions, she said. And although she knew that 98% of new hires would not stay long term, 2% did stay to become certified nursing assistants, dietary assistants and other professionals, Green-Yates said.

"They saw it as a new career," she said. "They came and found a new passion. It's a whole different perspective than having people who are always here."

The industry, Green-Yates added, needs to work on changing public perception if it wants to be successful at recruitment and retention.

"People don't want to come in [because of] a lot of the things that have been said about the industry. We want people to understand they can change the world," she said. "That's what this generation wants to do. If you can show them that and get them interested in that, you'll have a lot of people come in that we haven't seen before." ■

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