



Resident Engagement During COVID-19: Senior Living Finds the Silver Linings

A TOTAL BRAIN HEALTH INTERVIEW

Social engagement, intellectual stimulation, and physical fitness are key to staying brain healthy – and hallmark wellness offerings of many senior living communities. When the pandemic forced communities to restrict visitors and set physical distancing rules, the opportunities to socialize and stay active were dramatically reduced.

Take heart! While new restrictions may challenge old ways of programming activities, they have spurred a slew of creative, “out of the box” solutions that highlight the strong commitment of senior living administrators and staff to keeping residents healthy, happy and engaged. And many of these recent adaptations are here to stay.

Total Brain Health’s **Dr. Cynthia Green**, recently spoke with senior leadership at leading companies to learn how their enrichment staff are not just handling the new restrictions, but going above and beyond to keep residents fulfilled across body, mind and spirit:

- **James Harvey**, VP of Marketing and Communications, and **Chuck Jennings**, Senior VP of Clinical Services, both with ALG Senior, which serves 160 communities throughout the Southeast;
- **Ashlea Smalley**, Corporate Director of Life Enrichment at Tutura Senior Living & Health Care, with 38 communities in the South and Midwest; and
- **Laura Ellen Christian**, Senior Vice President of Engagement and Dementia Training for the Arbor Company, with more than 40 communities in 11 states.

Taking it to the Hallways

“The pandemic put us in uncharted territory,” said ALG Senior’s James Harvey. “We’ve had to change the way we function in order to respond efficiently and effectively, putting the residents and the staff at the heart of every decision we make. To do so we’ve taken a more supportive role.”

Chuck Jennings described how ALG Senior communities adapted when the need for physical distancing suspended large gatherings in common rooms. “We organized regular hall chats,” said Jennings. “We pull two or three residents into their doorways to engage with their neighbors.” ALG Senior does the same for physical activity, bringing residents into the hall for exercises. And the group also set up a pen pal program to connect residents with those in other communities who have shared interests.

Hallways are buzzing with other activities as well. “We do silly stuff just for entertainment,” says Tuter’s Ashlea Smalley. “We’ve organized races with little remote-control cars, and one building even staged a Kentucky Derby, with staffers galloping down the hall in horse masks. We also do activity carts with extravagant themes.”

To help with the quality of hallway activities, the Arbor Company implemented Eversound, a wireless headphone system in all communities. “This technology allows residents to hear what’s happening regardless of where they are. If an engagement team member is leading exercise at one end of the hallway, residents can still hear the instructions through the headphones and follow along.” says Laura Ellen Christian. “Eversound has also been a huge help during window and outdoor family visits” she adds.

Taking It to the Outdoors

With families unable to visit in person, car parades have provided a new diversion. “Some of our communities have organized parades that involve the entire town,” says Harvey. “People drive by with signs to show support for the residents who are socially distanced out front.”

Tutera staff also started podcast listening clubs, where residents listen from a speaker set up outside, and then engage in lively discussions together.

The enrichment teams at Tutera even innovated solutions for special events. “One of our buildings did a brilliant ‘Drive-by Donuts with Dad’ for Father’s Day,” says Smalley. “We had families drive up and have their doughnuts and coffee in the car while chatting with their Dad, who was having his at a table set up outside.”

Similar things are happening at Arbor Company communities. “We know the benefits that fresh air and sunshine have for all. Helping residents take walks and enjoy time outside has been a priority for our engagement team members.” says Laura Ellen Christian.

The Zoom Boom

Not surprisingly, staff have worked tirelessly to help residents get more comfortable with video apps like Zoom and FaceTime, allowing families to see their loved ones and staff to host distance learning classes.

“People are adopting technology in ways we’ve wanted them to for so long,” says the Arbor Company’s Laura Ellen Christian. “Besides arranging family calls, we Zoom in people like art therapists, musicians and exercise trainers to the residents’ apartments.”

Smalley says her activity directors have taught family members how to use Skype. “We also use it to connect residents who’d been tablemates in the dining room. We had one lady who wouldn’t do a Skype call with a friend because the beautician hadn’t been there in weeks to do her hair! ‘I’m not getting on a screen,’ she said. ‘I’ll send a letter instead.’”

ALG Senior has really upped their game on social media, says Harvey. “We’re using Facebook to tell family members about all the heartwarming and creative ways the staff are keeping residents engaged.” These include the vast array of online resources available, such as virtual tours of national parks and museums, and free online courses. Even low-tech pastimes have gotten an upgrade: “Residents are having fun playing Bingo from their rooms by walkie-talkie!”

Custom TV

In-house TV channels that stream content directly into residents' apartments is also a powerful engagement tool. Tintera communities are actively promoting their internal TV programming. "We broadcast bingo and exercise sessions to everyone in their rooms," says Smalley. "Also, things like virtual travel tours and Google Earth are incredible. One building does weekly five-minute news flashes to update residents."

Harvey reports that some ALG Senior communities are linked through a company called Connected Living, and they may install it companywide. "But first we're listening to what the communities have to say," he adds. "Some residents appreciate having the staff navigate that technical role; they don't necessarily want to do it themselves. They'd sooner be gardening, for instance."

Looking Ahead

"At first, the pandemic was such an emergency we had to put things in place quickly," says Smalley. "But now we're taking the time to figure out how to do things in creative, high-quality ways that will be impactful and meaningful for all our residents."

The Arbor Company has created a well-being survey for residents to assist teams in maintaining programs that provide a good balance of safety and resident-driven joy. "We're thinking about safety and joy for our staff as well," Christian says. "Our communities are like our homes. If residents aren't happy and fulfilled, that affects staff as well. And vice versa."

"We're always looking for the silver lining in this dark Covid cloud," says Harvey. "To me, it would be the augmented resident engagement, the more personalized care, and the new focus on communication—all things we'll continue to implement going forward, even outside the realm of the pandemic."

Total Brain Health continues to offer a variety of free resources you can use to bring your residents better brain fitness and boost well-being anytime, anywhere. Programs include *TBH On Demand* interactive training videos and hallway programs, with directions for a Memory Mobile cart and activities for those living with dementia. Find all our free resources at <http://anytime.totalbrainhealth.com/>.

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