

## **Not a Crisis of Caring** ***Senior living communities fight COVID-19***

Illness. Fear. Uncertainty. Loss. These are the difficult realities that the caregivers and administrators at our nation's nursing facilities, assisted living communities and other senior congregate settings are facing each day as they battle COVID-19. The simple yet grim fact is that the COVID-19 pandemic has been catastrophic for the senior living industry. For nursing homes, assisted living communities and other congregate settings, COVID-19 is a perfect storm; a nightmare scenario with guidance and directives changing on a daily basis as more is learned each day about this devastating disease.

While there is a crisis occurring in our nation's senior living communities, it is not a crisis of caring. It is not a crisis caused by indifference nor borne of negligence. This is a medical crisis, pure and simple. A medical crisis that has engulfed the entire globe and demonstrated that our public health system was simply not prepared. Senior living communities are part of our public health system. Senior living communities have not disregarded the emergency needs of their residents, as some may portray. They are in the impossible position of trying to protect the most vulnerable from an unseen enemy, an enemy that has often invaded communities through well-intentioned individuals who carry the virus but display no symptoms. To protect their residents, they are forced to compete and scramble for protective equipment and testing resources alongside federal and State governments and other health care providers trying to find the same supplies. Some have taken the extraordinary and costly step to contract with independent tailors to make washable gowns when they were not readily available in the market. These are not the actions of the indifferent.

As the President of Lifespan Network, the largest senior care provider association in the Mid-Atlantic, I have the honor of knowing many of Maryland's senior living leaders and frontline staff personally. "This is probably the most challenging time I have ever faced in my career," Jeff Kagan, President of Sterling Senior Care, and a Member of the LifeSpan Network board of directors, told me recently. "It has made me realize how blessed I am to be working with the most dedicated team, who cares deeply for all of our residents and fellow colleagues. It is a situation that none of us dealt with before and we feel like we are all learning on the job."

By and large, early on Maryland's senior living communities voluntarily locked down, instituted increased safety and sanitation measures, and changed their daily operating procedures. Caregivers are working extra hours and shifts to care for the sick. Because of care provided by dedicated staff, residents have recovered and these victories are celebrated by staff, even as they are not reported to the community by the media. "The heroic efforts to follow the best available guidance to reduce the spread of this highly infectious and deadly disease by nursing home frontline caregivers is inspiring," notes Carmel Roques, CEO of Keswick, and Chair of the LifeSpan board of directors. "It's their commitment and caring that makes the difference."

When I hear news coverage insinuating that residents of nursing homes and assisted living communities are being forsaken and sacrificed to this virus, it makes me sad and angry. Sad because the senior living professionals who are giving so much of themselves hear those reports too. Angry because they too deserve to be recognized as frontline caregivers; they too deserve to be awarded with free coffees and other perks provided to other caregivers; they too deserve shout outs for their dedicated service. They cannot—and should not—believe that their work is futile, or that they have somehow failed the older adults they lovingly care for every day. They have not failed.

The virus may be winning right now, but it is not because of lack of efforts on the part of dedicated senior living administrators and frontline providers. They deserve all the credit in the world for caring so much and giving so much when it matters most. Whether they are holding the hands of the ill or connecting residents to families digitally, these caregivers are making a difference. When historians and public health officials look back on this crisis, the question that will need to be asked is whether, as a nation, we did all that we could to proactively protect not reactively protect this population. There is a crisis, but it is not a crisis in caring. Administrator and frontline workers care—and we should all be proud of that. I know I am.