



MASSACHUSETTS LIFE CARE RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

PANDEMIC LIFE IN MLCRA COMMUNITIES

By Lauren Hale, MLCRA President

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The board of the Massachusetts Life Care Residents' Association (MLCRA) organized a survey to learn how different retirement communities are handling the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. Early this summer, we sent the survey to the presidents of the Resident Associations or Resident Councils in the sixteen MLCRA member communities. We are happy that all sixteen communities responded and we thank you for your participation.

The survey includes questions about **communication with management, visitor policy, the closing of common areas, dining, housekeeping, mail and other deliveries, and programs.**

There were many similarities in how we lived in our individual communities during the pandemic. There were also some differences. The survey responses may give you some new ideas that could be adapted in your own community.

We hope there will not be a "second wave" of the virus later this year but, if there is, we should be better prepared than we were the first time. We are also moving toward a "new normal." Some of what we learned during these past months may help us.

1) How has your management communicated with residents during the coronavirus pandemic? Please list all communications tools that have been used.

Management in all sixteen communities distributed paper notices to residents throughout the pandemic. Most communities also used email and phone calls. Eight communities used closed circuit TV to broadcast reports from members of their management as well as information about each day's programs and meal menus. Eight used Zoom for announcements and updates. Five posted information on their resident website.

2) Has your Resident Association or Resident Council been consulted about actions taken? If so, how?

Three Resident Association (RA) presidents responded that management did not consult with them. The other RA presidents reported various degrees of interaction.

In one community, the RA president and vice president met weekly in-person with management. In other communities, resident associations met regularly by Zoom or phone with management. Sometimes residents had to take the initiative to make sure their voices were heard. One RA president commented that “we intruded.”

All facilities had to follow state guidelines. There were limited options about how to implement the guidelines. Resident associations used their meetings with management to discuss COVID procedures, make suggestions and ask questions.

Three RA presidents reported that their resident committees such as dining, health, and programs met by Zoom. Residents in one community formed a medical advisory group to help residents cope with the deluge of information at the beginning and to reinforce management recommendations.

3) Have residents been informed about COVID cases in independent living and other levels (assisted living or nursing home) in your community?

Fifteen communities responded that management reported the number of COVID cases to residents. Some put the information on their community’s website.

Information about cases in nursing homes and assisted living was also available on the website of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. Information about independent living was not on the DPH site.

4) If residents or staff have tested positive, has your community done contact tracing?

Eleven responded that contact tracing was done in their community. Three said they did not know or were not sure how extensive contact tracing had been. One said that tracing was stopped because many residents felt it was an invasion of their privacy. One RA president answered that no resident or staff had tested positive.

5) Has your community prohibited non-essential visitors, including family?

Non-essential visitors have been prohibited in all communities. In most cases, only caregivers have been allowed to visit residents.

6) How have essential visitors and staff been screened upon entering the community?

All facilities require visitors to have their temperatures taken. Many also have a questionnaire about visitors' general health and recent travel. Some ask visitors to use hand sanitizer. Staff and visitors in one community are given stickers to put on their name tags. A different color sticker is used each day.

7) Were residents asked not to leave their apartments? Starting when?

Residents in fourteen communities were asked not to leave their apartments, starting between mid-March and early April. In communities that have cottages as well as apartments, cottage residents were usually less restricted.

8) If residents have been allowed to leave the community, how have they been screened upon their return?

All communities checked the temperature of residents who were returning to apartments after a short absence. In five communities, residents were asked to self-quarantine if they were gone overnight.

9) What areas of your community have been closed off to residents?

Most communities closed common areas such as meeting rooms, fitness centers, pools, workshops, and libraries. Some also closed mailrooms and stores. Others allowed residents access to mailrooms and stores but limited the number of residents who could be in those areas at one time. One community allowed resident to continue borrowing books from the library but stopped leaving daily newspapers on the reading table.

10) Were your dining rooms closed?

Dining rooms were closed in all sixteen communities.

11) Were meals delivered to your apartments or cottages? What meals were delivered? Breakfast? Lunch? Dinner?

Three meals a day were provided for assisted living residents.

Four communities delivered one meal -- dinner -- to independent living residents each day. Five communities delivered two meals --either breakfast or lunch and then

dinner. Independent living residents in six communities had the option of receiving breakfast, lunch and dinner. In some cases, this involved additional charges. In one community, dinner was delivered at midday seven days a week and lunch was delivered three days a week in the late afternoon.

Residents in one community, which had a cocktail lounge before the pandemic, could request wine or beer with dinner. Wine was delivered in unopened splits and beer in unopened bottles. In another community, wine was offered one evening a week.

12) Were housekeeping services suspended? Starting when?

Two communities did not suspend housekeeping services. Twelve suspended services in independent living units, beginning in mid-March or April. Two suspended services in independent living on May 1. Housekeeping continued and intensified in other parts of the community.

13) How was mail delivery handled in your community?

In eleven of the communities, U.S. mail was delivered to a central place. Staff sorted the mail and delivered it to residents' apartments. In four communities, residents picked up their mail as usual in the mail room. One community gave residents the choice of picking up their own mail or having staff deliver it to their apartments. One community required outgoing mail to be sealed only with tape and given to a receptionist.

14) How were other deliveries handled?

In all communities, deliveries for apartment residents were left at the front desk or other central place. Some facilities disinfected the outside of the packages. Staff then brought them to residents' apartments. In one community, residents could pick up their packages in the lobby.

15) Were residents discouraged from doing their own grocery shopping? If so, how were they able to get groceries?

Residents in twelve communities were told not to go grocery shopping. In the other four communities, some residents chose to do their own shopping and some did not.

Residents in all communities used delivery services such as Peapod and Instacart. Families could also bring groceries to a designated entrance, where they were usually sanitized and then delivered by staff to residents. Staff in some communities shopped

for residents in local supermarkets. Seven communities had in-house stores, where residents could buy groceries.

16) What activities or programs have been conducted during this period? We are very interested in how virtual programs have been used. We are also interested in any activities available for residents who do not use computers.

One community continued regular programs in the auditorium with a maximum of ten residents, distance seating and masks.

Nine of the sixteen communities used closed-circuit TV during the shutdown. Programs included fitness classes, meditation, lectures, concerts, and movies.

Twelve of the sixteen communities used Zoom for activities such as meetings, book groups, lectures, memoir writing, and exercise classes. Daily Zoom programs were a resident initiative in one community. After all regular programs were cancelled, residents organized a daily Zoom meeting. Staff then facilitated other activities on Zoom.

Zoom and similar systems played an important role during the pandemic. All residents, however, do not have computers. One community arranged FaceTime visits for residents without electronic devices. Some communities distributed books, DVDs and puzzles to residents.

In two communities, strolling musicians roamed the buildings so that they could be heard in all apartments. The fitness instructor in one community held exercise classes on individual residential floors.

17) Are residents, staff and visitors required to wear masks?

Masks are required in all our communities.

18) Did residents make masks for other residents, staff or outside groups?

Residents in eleven communities made masks. Most were given away for free. Some were sold to benefit charity.

19) When did your community begin to restore some of the services suspended during the pandemic?

Communities began restoring some services with restrictions in June. Most have been following state guidance but lagging behind a couple of weeks.

Many communities began restoring housekeeping in June although some waited until July. Residents wearing masks and social distancing were allowed back into libraries, mailrooms and meeting rooms. Limited salon services were restored at the request of residents with “pandemic hair.”

Exercise classes, concerts and other activities moved outside during June. One community has allowed outdoor dining for groups of four with social distancing. Indoor communal dining has not begun as of the end of July.

20) Other Comments

Several RA presidents complimented the efforts made by staff to adapt to new duties during the pandemic. Residents in one community took up a special collection to thank staff.

Some commented that the pandemic had brought home the importance of technology in keeping families and friends connected. They would like communities to do more to help residents to use technology and they want MLCRA to support that effort.

Some worried about the effect on residents of long-term isolation in their apartments or cottages. One of the attractions of retirement communities has been the opportunity to socialize with other residents. That personal contact was lost for several weeks during the pandemic. ##