



**The Changing Face of Senior Care**  
by Jeanne West

Senior Living Communities, both those that offer independent living apartments, along with their care centers (Skilled Nursing and Assisted Living), as well as the freestanding Assisted Living communities, small and large alike, have changed into isolated, self-contained communities. It has been two months since all of our lives changed, due to the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent “sequestration,” but for our care communities, there has been a tremendous impact to a wider group of people.

Once very active and bustling with activities, games, music and visitors, these care communities are now more silent. The people with Dementia who “come alive” in groups with music are now having to be at a safe distance and are missing the jovial spirit that comes with the group singing, dancing and other activities. The dining experience has also changed, with fewer people at each table and perhaps extended dining hours to accommodate the total population, while still adhering to safe distancing.

Then we think about the “no visitor” rule – this is equally as painful for the families and loved ones as it is for the residents. For those residents with Dementia, absence of that familiar family face may mean that over time, their loved one may not be recognized. This is a sad reality shared by a number of loving family members. Yet, creativity has stepped in and families are using “Facetime” and “ZOOM” as a way of staying visually connected with their loved ones. How different our lives would be without this amazing technology that we now have at our fingertips!

For the facility owners, managers and staff, the changes have resulted in a new way of working and interacting with their residents. Now, the caregiver appears at the resident’s room, wearing a mask and gloves. Whereas before, residents may have gathered in a large group dining room for meals, now the residents are served in shifts, or may choose to have the meal in their own rooms – more social isolation.

In reaching out to touch bases and see what issues facility administrators and owners might be facing and how Hospice of Santa Barbara might be a support system, I learned that leadership and staff of senior care communities have become creative and most definitely demonstrated resilience. What was most gratifying was the frequently repeated comment, “thank you so much for calling to check in – that means so much to us.” Other comments: “we are proud to say that there are no infections among residents or staff.” One small facility owner said, “our residents are making ‘appreciation’ signs!” Another facility administrator acknowledged, “The experience has been rough, but we are adjusting.”

The following comment really captured what a larger community can do to respond to a change of this magnitude: “We are doing a lot of extras for the residents ... we are small enough to be able to do more and large enough to have the staff to do it.”

The single HUGE need that both administrators expressed was support for families - experience grief and loss as they cannot be PRESENT in person with their loved ones, to communicate and to “touch”. Both thought that a support group for families would be helpful

and will outreach to families to see if they would participate in some type of support group. While we ourselves may feel at times that we are getting “cabin fever,” just imagine what it is like for the residents, both those who are alert, as well as those who have cognitive impairment, to experience being isolated (state requirements) from the physical presence of family and friends. Caregivers are now taking on an added role of “surrogate family” out of necessity. Clearly, they do not want to replace family, yet a closer bond is surely being formed as they try to fill that ‘companionship’ gap left open by the visitor restriction.

Behind the clouds, there are opportunities for growth and change – maybe not a positive aspect, but there is evidence that out of challenges comes creativity and resilience. Let us acknowledge and thank all those who have dedicated their life’s work to caring for our more frail senior members. We honor you, appreciate you, and open our hearts and invite you in as valued members of the caregiving community. You are our local heroes!

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