

Care in an Unsettled Time

No Independent Living residents at Collington are sick with Covid-19. It hasn't been easy. This is how we've done it.

Care comes in many guises. It can be deeply emotional: the embrace of a grandchild or holding the hand of a loved one. It can be prosaic: holding a handrail on the stairs or being careful about what we eat. In the time of coronavirus, care takes on an entirely new dimension: early intervention, best practices, and strict adherence to protocols.

The Independent Living (IL) residents at Collington have been both practitioners and beneficiaries of this new kind of care.

Last year outside experts had given Collington their highest health and safety evaluations – “No Deficiencies.” The protocols, systems and measures that resulted in these top marks were put to the ultimate test this year.

In early March the first case of Covid-19 came to the East Coast when a person was diagnosed in New York City. With planning initiated in February, Kendal at Collington management was ready, putting its emergency operations plan into effect. A series of stringent measures to protect residents and staff from this novel and often deadly disease was rolled out.

Residents, too, quickly pitched in. An informal network formed almost overnight to make cloth masks for residents and non-medical staff alike. People dug through their supplies and came up with a treasure trove of fabric and elastic. Sewing machines took up semi-permanent placement on tables. Shears and measuring tapes were deployed. More than 400 resident-made masks were soon being seen around campus. Area leaders checked with fellow residents to ensure that no one was overlooked.

With the closure of the dining rooms, meals were delivered to residents' doors. Hand sanitizers were re-stocked and extra stations added. Staff were screened daily: temperature checks, questionnaires, hand washing, and masks. Every employee. Every shift. Every day.

The strong bonds between management, staff and residents proved vital. Two-way communication occurred daily through both formal and informal channels. Full transparency regarding every action was a hallmark of the effort, including multiple updates every week, shared via the internal Collington TV channel, email, and printed materials.

Vigilance has become a key operational value. Extraordinary peer support has kept resident compliance with safety protocols at consistently high levels.

The lockdown of campus has been tough. Everyday occurrences such as educational, cultural and entertainment activities were shut down. So were the library, the fitness room, the pool, the billiards room, meeting and game rooms, and the auditorium. The bank, the hair salon and the Country Store were closed.

Facing unprecedented restrictions, residents responded with creativity. A number of programs were added to Collington TV: exercise classes, resident-led yoga sessions and short-story readings. “Music from Our Front Porch” became a popular weekly program. Our resident music intern from the University of Maryland, Natalie Groom, rolled up her sleeves and developed an entirely new set of programs: solo recitals, lectures, and curated listening sessions. Along the way, she completed her doctorate, celebrating the milestone virtually with the Collington family.

Early in the pandemic, two Independent Living residents contracted Covid-19. Thankfully, neither resident required hospitalization. Today they are both healthy once again.

When widespread testing finally became available at the end of May, the administration contracted with a company to come to campus to test IL residents. Nearly 90 percent of residents took advantage of the opportunity. In a tightly orchestrated effort spread over two days, residents were swabbed, and samples sent to the lab. Within a few days all the results were back: not a single IL resident tested positive.

That new dimension of care here at Collington among management, staff and residents was rising to meet one of the greatest challenges of our lifetimes.

We have not escaped totally unscathed. Our Creighton Center, which houses our skilled nursing, assisted living, and memory care units, has suffered painful losses. Although physically separate from the IL residents, these people are nonetheless part of our larger community. Some of the five residents who passed away were on hospice care. Whether they died of Covid-19 or merely with Covid-19 is, in some respects, immaterial. Their loss is keenly felt.

We are not out of the woods yet. As Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, remarked recently: We are tired of the virus, but the virus never gets tired.

As we regularly remind ourselves: wash your hands, wear your mask, and stay six feet apart. Stay vigilant. Stay healthy. Take care.

Mike Burke is a Collington Independent Living resident