

The Rivers goes with the flow: Residents, staff adjust to COVID-prompted changes

By Jody McVeigh on February 18, 2021

After 2020 dealt the world a lemon of a year, The Rivers Grosse Pointe is making lemonade.

Despite visitor restrictions, as well as the suspension of communal dining, gym therapy, group activities and use of common areas, administrators have adapted programming to ensure residents are engaged and entertained.

The Rivers, which offers independent and assisted living, as well as memory care and physical rehabilitation services, has followed federal and state mandates since they were imposed. But even before such restrictions, the team reacted swiftly early on to keep residents, their loved ones and staff healthy and safe.

“It has been a very difficult year,” The Rivers CEO Richard Levin said. “It’s been especially difficult for our residents and their families and friends in regards to visitation and knowing how everybody is doing.”

Changes to The Rivers’ day-to-day operations were implemented from the start of the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning and disinfecting, especially in public areas. All employees were required to wear face masks, as were residents using public areas; employees were screened at the start of their shifts; and, when they became available, COVID tests were administered.

Additionally, visitation was restricted.

“Visitation has been one of the most difficult and emotional consequences of this pandemic,” Levin said. “It’s been difficult for us to see and watch. We want to permit it, but we haven’t been able to.”

Though Levin admits The Rivers has been conservative in keeping people apart, the goal still is for residents to have fun and keep smiling, even during the challenges of social distancing and self-isolation.



Photos courtesy of The Rivers
Independent Living Activities Director Sydney Bishop, left, and The Rivers resident Gloria Smith offer an “I Love Lucy” door-to-door cart with chocolate and wine.



The pandemic, he added, has refocused staff efforts on maintaining residents' safety while providing extra care and attention.

The Rivers resident Robert Wayland at the COVID vaccine clinic, celebrating his first dose.

“Activities are a part of life here at The Rivers,” Executive Director John Toupin said. “We had to be creative in how to provide activities in a different format that’s safe for everyone.”

Toupin credited the staff with coming up with creative ways to show residents they care. One such activity is a themed room-to-room cart, which could include anything from Valentine’s Day crafts to “pub drinks” for happy hour.



The Rivers resident Pat Nurse offered a door-to-door “Camp Rivers” cart with drinks, S’mores and pigs in a blanket.

“They’re activities that allow staff to engage, in a one-on-one setting, with residents in the doorway of their room,” Toupin said. “We’ve been creative in how we’re doing different things within the community.”

The swimming pool, he added, is open by appointment. Additionally, Balcony Bingo has become a popular new game, with residents from all three floors seated along the inward-facing balcony overlooking the atrium, from which bingo numbers are called.

Despite changing policies and limited interactions, residents have expressed thanks to administrators and staff for taking such strong measures.

“We tried to provide as much communication with residents so they would understand what was happening,” Toupin said. “We tried to be the voice of reason. No matter what changes were made in our policies, our residents were extremely grateful and their families were extremely grateful.”

Today, The Rivers is continuing efforts put in place nearly a year ago, Toupin said, and continues to modify its approach to keeping residents safe.

“We’re meeting all requirements imposed by federal and state authorities,” Levin added. “It’s been a challenge. It can be hard for people to understand. But we continue to comply and have distancing and have measures to keeping people safe.”

As a result, staff regularly assists residents with different ways of staying connected to their loved ones, from phone calls to electronic visits to seeing loved ones through windows.

“Our hope is, as we continue to see employment of the vaccine ... some of the restrictions on visitations are pulled back a little,” Levin said. “Our goal is to get back to some semblance of normal ... to resume to where we were pre-COVID.”

Of the residents and staff who have chosen to receive the vaccine, most already have gotten their second doses; those who haven't should receive it by week's end, Toupin said.

While The Rivers has experienced few cases of the coronavirus, such cases were addressed swiftly, Levin said. As part of its COVID protocol, The Rivers has a dedicated isolation unit for residents who show symptoms of the coronavirus.

"We're saddened by any losses to families affected by this disease," Levin said. "But we are happy to report no positive cases in the building as we speak."

Enriching residents' lives with care, compassion and dignity remains a focus at The Rivers, even in the midst of the pandemic. Families whose loved ones need the assistance The Rivers can provide are welcome to reach out.

"We know this can be challenging," Levin said. "We will work with families to make the transition as smooth as possible."



The Rivers resident Barbara Grogan went door to door with a "Peanuts" cart featuring popcorn, snacks and drinks.



Photos courtesy of The Rivers
The Rivers residents Margaret Strachan, left, and Joanne Maxson celebrated Oktoberfest door to door with beer and pretzels.

Added Toupin, "Not only for the residents in our building, but for the community, life goes on. The need for what we provide to enhance lives, that need hasn't changed. We've moved people into our building safely, because life continues on. We're here to provide the necessary resources so people can continue to live with dignity. We're here to enrich their lives."

Levin thanked The Rivers residents and their loved ones for their support and understanding during the pandemic and also thanked the staff for going above and beyond.

"The dedication of our staff and caregivers" has been outstanding, he said. "They've never given up. They've maintained an incredible attitude. They truly are heroes who are dedicated to the safety and well-being of residents throughout The Rivers."

For more information about The Rivers and its services, call (313) 885-5005.