

## Keeping Spirits Up During Pandemic

Providers of all types of care are being asked to perform in ways that go well beyond the “normal” demands during this time. Although the article below is focused on nursing homes, the ideas that are shared can certainly be transferred to all types of work environments, and may spur thoughts of how to show appreciation to the staff who are showing dedication to the people we all support. This article is from *McKnight’s Long-Term Care News*:

*McKnight’s Long-Term Care News* asked nursing home leaders what they were doing to “help keep spirits up” during the coronavirus pandemic and, boy, did they tell us.

Nearly 500 providers, in fact, opened up to share what their favorite coping mechanisms are. We share the results with you here.

The most popular answers culled from the *McKnight’s* COVID-19 [flash survey](#) last weekend involved free food for staff, dress-up or theme days, flexible work hours, and increased communication with staff members.

Providers also opened up about hundreds of customized approaches aimed at keeping staff and residents’ morale up. Social distancing and isolation mandates have strained both residents and workers since a state of emergency was declared March 13. With no foreseeable end in sight, being creative and keeping things fresh will be a key to long-term care providers maintaining a healthy environment.

- It is clear that administrators are looking out for their staff most often with food incentives. From free daily meals for staff (and family members), to ordering in several times a week to homemade goodies and a coffee bar, either full meals or munchies came into play a majority of the time. Popular standbys such as popcorn, pizza and ice cream popped up often in various frequencies per week and delivery formats.

One respondent said prepaid groceries are given to staff, while one location reported “meals for employees to take home.”

- Actually, themes of “frequent communication” in all their various forms, might have beaten out food mentions. This includes giving frequent thank you’s, daily updates to staff, an administrator hosting a daily Q&A session, holding “town hall” meetings for staff to ask questions, pep talks, 1-on-1 meetings between managers and employees, and just generally exuding an air of positivity.

A texting campaign to show employee appreciation also was favored at one location. Closely affiliated is the provider who mentioned sees daily emails from facility chaplains to staff. Praying, of course, is a popular pick-me-up for many.

- One building leader took the “thank you” theme deeper than others, writing sending thank you notes to staff members’ loved ones.

- Managers' very visible help was also a frequent mention. This means working side-by-side, rounding daily to chat up staff members, and filling in for workers — on any shift and in virtually any capacity. The old adage "Don't just say it, show it" certainly is in evidence.
- Money, of course, stands out, and there are many ways more is being given out to brighten spirits. Survey respondents wrote about \$1.50 extra per hour or \$20 per shift, while another location pays for five hours' work when only four hours is complete. Another building pays 1.5 times the normal hourly rate for picking up vacant shifts. Extra overtime opportunities are also seen as morale boosters in many instances. Flex time is popular, as are occasional gifts of lottery tickets.
- Other winning providers offer things such as yoga, rides to work, financial assistance for childcare, special pins to wear, or an area to nap or meditate.
- A small, but notable, percentage responded that their facilities did nothing or very little extra to raise morale. This was deflating for survey takers, but such reports were clearly in the minority.
- Others spoke glowingly of theme dress-up days (such as sports teams, colors and jeans days). Casual and dress-down days also are very popular, whereas numerous locations boasted about having T-shirts with special sayings made.
- Hitting a special chord was the provider holding staff baby picture contests, while a few mentioned the lure of one of the biggest prizes of all: toilet paper giveaways.

### **Aimed at residents**

Of course, a lot of extra attention is being directed at residents. Many have increased the number of activities professionals on duty, if only because it helps get face to face with residents isolated in their rooms. Activities staff were reported wandering hallways playing their guitars, helping conduct hallway bingo and leading card-writing campaigns to loved ones and staff members.

- Getting more helpers into resident rooms to help facilitate FaceTime, Skype or similar calls with family members was No. 1 on the list. One facility makes sure a family is called at least twice a week per resident, or more if desired.
- Making paper airplanes and flying them down each hallway (so everybody could see them) was popular, while music streamed throughout common areas and into rooms also was mentioned.
- One location is conducting exercise regimens with the help of headphones given to residents, while trivia contests for both residents and staff were mentioned numerous times.
- Making it possible to see visitors through windows, of course, was among the most uplifting. This would include family members, of course, but also animal visitors such as a kangaroo, dogs or cats.

There seemed to be little question that wherever a few things were popular, other ideas would pop up. Momentum is a key when creating a brighter mood, social workers and psychologists remind at any time of the year, but especially in stressful time.

To that end, this provider has a strong mixture of extra attention for both staff and residents, and may have a better facility health quotient because of it: "We're devoting 1d/week for luncheons and we set up a 'decompression room' for [staff] to go to, filled with aromatherapy, meditation tapes, puzzles and the ability to speak to one of our Dept. Mgrs. who has a degree in counseling. Our community has also been extremely supportive, sending fresh-cut flowers and cards to our residents."

The message from the most active survey respondents seemed to be: It's going to be a long ride, not a sprint, so keep looking for new or different ways to brighten the mood in your environment. Sharing ideas is definitely encouraged.

And as one survey-taker noted, it's a great time to learn which of these tactics are the most popular because once the coronavirus crisis has subsided there's no reason the special activities and mood-lifting strategies shouldn't be used year round on an ongoing basis.