



# 5 Communications Tips in Senior Care:

*Incorporating lessons learned from COVID-19 to improve communications with residents, families and staff.*



**A white paper for decision-makers in senior care communities, including:**

C-Suite Executives  
Administrators/Executive Directors  
Communications & Marketing  
Human Resources

July 2021

[www.carefeed.com](http://www.carefeed.com)

## Shortly after some of the nation's first COVID-19 cases emerged in a Washington state nursing home in late February 2020,

senior care communities across the country went on lock down to protect those most vulnerable to the virus.

Visitation practically ceased overnight, and few could have predicted how long it would take before communities could safely reopen their doors to family and friends. Among many of the lessons from COVID-19, senior care communities quickly learned the important role of communications in sharing critical updates with residents, families and staff, but more importantly, in maintaining their trust.

This white paper examines communications lessons learned in senior care communities during COVID-19 and offers tips to help communities reach their most important audiences with the **right message**, at the **right time**, and using the **right tools**.



*Honesty and transparency  
make you vulnerable.*

*Be honest and transparent anyway.*

Mother Teresa

## TIP

# 1 Your reputation depends on transparency and trust.

Most senior care providers are no strangers to scrutiny, but COVID-19 put providers under a spotlight which resulted in more attention—and criticism—than ever before. Not only were immediate audiences like residents, families, staff and regulators closely watching—but providers were thrust into the centerstage of the pandemic and the public at large was watching.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 disproportionately impacted seniors, and made life disproportionately harder for those who care for them. Providers and their employees were forced to navigate a barrage of conflicting information from local, state and federal entities, as well as the everchanging updates and guidelines that resulted. Providers bore an enormous responsibility in keeping residents and staff safe from an invisible enemy, and one extraordinary hurdle after another left residents, families and staff feeling frustrated and confused in addition to being fearful of the many unknowns posed by COVID-19.

### ***Be more than truthful; be transparent.***

When one is under so much stress and uncertainty, a natural inclination may be to stay silent. However, you must be truthful if you are to maintain trust with your audiences—especially in bad times. Even then, being truthful isn't always enough. You must also be transparent, which implies being proactive in sharing information.

Being transparent during a crisis like COVID-19 is difficult because of the many unknowns, and what you do and say may open you up to further scrutiny. However, withholding information because of uncertainty or fear may incite your audiences to become angry and distrustful when they inevitably learn that you haven't been forthcoming with information. Providers must be proactive in communicating—especially in a crisis—and even when you don't have all the answers or solutions. Otherwise, you may cause irreparable damage to your reputation which in itself can become a crisis.

## TIP 2 Communicate early and often.

The senior care industry is heavily regulated, and providers are accustomed to a mountain of government mandates and regulations, including those that emerged during COVID-19. Some of those regulations mandated how, what, when, and with whom providers were required to communicate about COVID-19 cases, suspected cases, and other related information. Many of these requirements were cumbersome, time-consuming, and duplicative, but they stemmed from a boiling point of complaints and concerns about a lack of information and transparency.

A common criticism in the negative news coverage of senior care communities throughout COVID-19 — and even before the pandemic — was that families and others didn't know what was going on or if their loved ones were safe because they weren't receiving regular updates and couldn't get in touch with staff. In some stories, families learned of updates through the media, or other sources. This led to fear, anger, distrust, and misinformation.

### ***Anticipate questions, concerns, fears and rumors.***

Providers should not wait until a crisis hits or gets worse—or until they are mandated—to communicate. In good times and in bad, providers should anticipate questions, concerns, fears and rumors and address them head on, and let your audiences hear it directly from you before they find out later through some other means like a negative news story. After all, the truth always comes out—they will hear it through some other means if not from you. Further, when you are the source of your information, you can put context to the message and help your audiences interpret it rather than leave it up for misinterpretation by someone else.

### ***Adopt a transparent, timely and frequent communications approach.***

Whether you are dealing with a hot issue, or a more routine operational update, adopt an approach of being transparent, timely and frequent in your communications. Operations and communications go hand-in-hand, and if you deem an operational decision to be of interest or concern to your families, staff, or other audiences, communicate it.

Additionally, don't wait until you have every piece of the puzzle to communicate. Your audiences want timely updates. It's ok to let them know you don't have all the answers right away, but you should continuously update them as situations evolve and in response to operational needs and requirements. Also, two-way communication is critical and as you receive feedback from your audiences, update your communications to address their questions and concerns. If you hear rumors or misinformation circulating, quickly address those as well.



*In June 2020, Miami University released results of a survey conducted with 200 family members of loved ones in long-term care.*

**Family members who had a more favorable opinion of a community reported receiving more frequent communication.**

# What should I communicate?

Here are some examples of notable, hot and potentially hot issues to consider communicating with residents, families, staff and/or others:



Policy or process changes and updates



Events that may affect the community or schedule of services temporarily or longer (e.g., events that warrant evacuation, weather incidents, power or other outages)



Major changes in personnel (leadership, key staff change), and/or other major changes in the organization



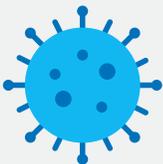
Cyber-attack/IT system compromised



Events that have the potential to cause significant illness or injury



Health and safety related updates and/or initiatives



A virus/infection/illness outbreak or threat



Resident or staff issues that have a potential to spark widespread interest



An incident that impacts transportation of staff, family members and/or residents



Other events that may spark public/media attention

- ▶ *Did your community or a member of your community receive major recognition?*
- ▶ *Are you having a birthday celebration for residents?*
- ▶ *Don't forget to communicate the positive updates, too!*



## TIP 3 Your employees should be among the first to know what's going on.

COVID-19 challenged providers to keep up with ever changing guidelines and requirements, as well as informing various audiences of seemingly never-ending updates such as those concerning Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) usage, COVID-19 activity, screening, testing, isolation requirements, visitation and more.

Providers were under extraordinary pressure to stay on top of the latest developments, and it was critical that staff were among the first to know of changes because the health and safety of residents—and their peers—was at stake.

### ***When possible, update your employees first.***

While senior care is a field that is obviously resident-focused, employees should be equally prioritized. It can be difficult to communicate simultaneously to various audiences in a fast-moving crisis like COVID-19, but employees should be among the very first to be notified of operational and other major updates so that they can prepare instead of react.

Employees should be equipped with information not only because so many people rely on them to safely do their jobs, but because employees are the foundation of an organization, and they should be treated as such.

Employees can be your biggest and most effective brand ambassadors, and they can serve as your strongest and most supportive advocates. Residents, family members and others turn to employees for information, and your reputation, credibility, and trustworthiness as a provider and employer depend on your staff knowing what's going on and how to respond.

Through effective communications, providers can foster trust and support with their employees, which directly and indirectly affects recruitment and retention. Employees may not always agree, like or fully understand operational decisions, but if they are well informed, they will more likely support you — and stick with you — even through the difficult times.



*Only 13% of employees throughout the U.S. strongly agree that the leadership of their organization communicates effectively with the rest of the organization.*

Source: Gallup State of the American Workplace Report

# Improve your employee communications

See the ideas below to help improve your employee communications.



If you have a major operational update, issue or crisis, will your employees know how to address potential questions or scenarios they get from residents, families, their peers or others?



**IDEA: Equip your employees with talking points that are regularly updated to address anticipated questions and concerns.**



Do your employees know where—or to whom—to direct residents, families, or others if they get questions that they don't know how to answer?



**IDEA: Regularly communicate with employees where—or to whom—they can direct inquiries. For example, do you have a company website where you're updating FAQs? Maybe you're using your social media channels to post updates? Make sure your employees know about these channels, what they're being used for, and the information that's posted there.**



Do you have regular, consistent touch points with employees to share organizational updates and give them the opportunity to ask questions and share concerns?



**IDEA: Consider a regular employee e-newsletter, and holding quarterly forums like in-person or virtual employee town halls. Also consider emailing surveys to employees to give them an opportunity to share feedback.**



Do your employees know what to do if they get contacted by the media?



**IDEA: Designate someone in your organization to be a point person for media inquiries, and ensure your employees know when and how to direct media requests to that person.**



If you expect something to negatively impact your employees, do you know how and when to communicate it to them?



**IDEA: Get ahead of potentially negative issues by creating a plan and timelines to communicate with employees before the issue becomes its own crisis.**

## TIP 4 Improved communications will improve your marketability.

The senior care industry was among the hardest hit by COVID-19. Many communities are still struggling with below average census, as well as significant workforce challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. As providers prioritize necessary environmental and operational improvements following the devastating impacts of COVID-19, improved communications are also a necessity. Marketability is vital for future survival, and marketability depends on effective communications.

If effective communications promotes trust—and residents, families and staff seek providers they trust—providers that effectively communicate will be in a much better position to attract people to live and work in their communities. But what do effective communications look like? In addition to always being truthful and transparent, here are several strategies to improve your communications so that you are more marketable to residents, families and staff.

### ***Align your messages with your mission, vision and values.***

Everything you do and say should be consistent with your mission, vision and values. Doing this strengthens your brand and brand awareness, and brings consistency to your messages.

### ***Tailor your messages.***

Though your messages should be consistent, they should also be customized so that they resonate and have the desired effect for the audience you're targeting. Put yourself in a particular audience's shoes and ask, "What's in it for me?" If your message can't answer that question in a compelling way, you need to rework it so that it will.

Also engage your audiences by including some sort of call to action so they know what to do next, or where to get more information.

### ***Keep it simple.***

With complex situations like COVID-19, keeping messages simple can be challenging. However, if you want your audiences to pay attention to and comprehend what you tell them, don't overcomplicate it. Avoid technical, industry jargon and keep your communications as natural and direct as possible.

### ***Highlight your successes.***

Your residents, families and staff will appreciate learning if you've been recognized for high-quality care, or if you've been nominated as an employer of choice. If you have accolades to share — especially ones that demonstrate you're a high-quality preferred provider or employer — let your audiences know.

### ***Encourage feedback and respond when you get it.***

Feedback is important for the success of your organization. It helps you improve operationally, and it demonstrates that you're listening to and engaging with your audiences. Be sure that you respond to feedback and let your audiences know how you're applying or addressing it.

### ***Don't get defensive.***

You should communicate the "why" behind operational decisions but avoid getting defensive. While you can't please everyone, use feedback and criticism as opportunities to improve or clarify your message, or to educate your audiences.

## TIP 5 The right (or wrong) tools can make or break effective communications.

When government mandates required providers to report information such as number of COVID-19 cases in a community, the information was made public through government websites. Eventually, some guidelines included mandates for providers to directly notify residents, families and staff, but didn't specify how or through what channels. Providers that didn't already have mass notification tools or processes in place were overwhelmed with reporting requirements which challenged staff and took precious time from other needs.

In a fast-moving situation like COVID-19, providers need tools and processes that make it easy to get messages out quickly while freeing up staff — especially those on the frontlines — to focus on the health, safety and wellbeing of those they care for.

Even great messages will be ineffective if people can't find or easily access them. Whether you're dealing with a crisis like COVID-19 or working to improve engagement with your audiences through more frequent communications, the tools and processes you use should be easy and convenient for everyone involved.

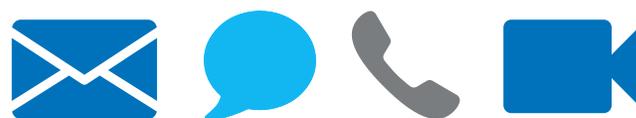
### ***Embrace technology.***

A silver lining to the pandemic is that COVID-19 advanced the use of technology and other innovations not only to facilitate medical care, but to help residents stay connected to families and friends. Technology solutions that promote effective, streamlined communications will only become more important as providers continue adapting to a new normal.

### ***A mass notification platform is a must.***

Especially in a crisis, you need the capability to get messages out quickly to all your audiences. The immediacy of a platform that allows you to text, email, send voice messages or video is vital for providers to effectively communicate while also meeting regulatory notification requirements.

Mass notification is also important in non-crisis situations. For example, alerting families about upcoming flu vaccinations or sending out your community's activity calendar, will be much easier if you have a platform that allows you to distribute information quickly. Having a platform to easily update families on what's going on in your community can also increase engagement and customer satisfaction.



### ***Platform should allow for targeted communications.***

Having a platform to send mass notifications is a must, but it's also important that you have the ability to target subsets of audiences or individuals. For example, you may need to limit certain communications to just those family members who are authorized to sign documentation, or perhaps you want to quickly update a family member about a scheduled care conference or offsite doctor's appointment. Having a platform that gives you flexibility will give you more opportunities to effectively communicate while saving time.

**Maintain and update your online presence.**

Don't make your audiences search government websites for COVID-19 activity or other important information concerning your community. Maintain and regularly update your own website and social media sites, which serve as important information hubs for your audiences to get real time information directly from the source, especially during a crisis. Also update your information on directory and review sites like Google and Yelp. This is especially important for prospective residents, families and staff who want to contact you.

# Don't wait for the next crisis.

As a result of COVID-19, senior care providers are being held to a higher standard. You must establish a consistent pattern of honesty, proactive and effective communications so that even if you face a negative situation, your reputation will precede you.

Don't wait until the next crisis to put a communications plan in place.

**Modernize your communications now with Carefeed's HIPAA secure platform.**

**Carefeed's** HIPAA secure SaaS platform digitizes materials senior communities share with their families, residents, staff and referral sources. **Carefeed** automates antiquated processes by using text, email, voice, and video to seamlessly distribute critical updates and announcements, admission agreements, welcome packets, and more.

**Carefeed** is flexible and enables providers to send mass notifications or targeted messages for a variety of communications needs.

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**Carefeed** gives senior care communities access to *all* of the following solutions:

COMMUNICATIONS	CALENDARS	QUESTIONNAIRES	E-SIGNATURES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Broadcast text, email and voicemails</li> <li>➤ Secure chat (share documents, photos, etc.)</li> <li>➤ Communications shared to residents' EHR charts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Visitation calendar improves the family experience</li> <li>➤ Activity calendar involves family in care</li> <li>➤ Appointment calendar automates care messages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Surveys for real time analytics</li> <li>➤ Pre-admitted or admitted assessments</li> <li>➤ Boost and steer positive reviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Text or email admission agreements</li> <li>➤ Record consent via text or email</li> <li>➤ Documents automatically upload to resident chart</li> </ul>

***Transform the way you communicate with your residents, family members, staff and others, and send beautiful, mobile-friendly messages that reach your audiences in the way they prefer to be reached.***

**Contact us** today to set up a demo and to learn more. Email [learnmore@carefeed.com](mailto:learnmore@carefeed.com) or call 513-800-7723.