

Visiting restrictions for senior facilities likely to last for some time

By **PATTI SINGER**

Color television. A man on the moon. A pocket-sized computer. The internet.

Over their lifetimes, older adults have seen science fiction become everyday life. But they probably never thought they'd see the day when their family couldn't give them a hug.

For seniors living in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, that has been the reality of COVID-19 since March, when edicts by the state and federal governments forbid visitors.

For the foreseeable future — and that may extend even after one or more vaccines are available — window visits, Facetime and Zoom are the norm. Residents who move into senior care likely will be reminded by staff wearing PPE to practice social distancing with other residents. Nursing home administrators expect that the changes they had to implement in days and weeks will last months and years.

"I don't see in my vision — although it's very hard to know — I don't see getting back to life as we once knew it for four or five years," said Dr. Marie Aydelotte, chief medical director and vice president of medical services for Jewish Senior Life.

Nate Sweeney, vice president of skilled services at St. John's, said that even when family can come back, visitors aren't likely to have 24-hour access where they can pop in whenever it's good for their schedule or that of their loved one. He also anticipates some sort of screening, such as a list of questions or a temperature check.

"The amount of change that the residents have been through is just enormous," he said. "I don't think it can be understated how much their lives and lifestyles have had to be completely upended."

Residents and staff have had to adjust to other changes, some of which have the potential to enhance resident life.

- Telemedicine. Consulting with a doctor via videoconference was more of a novelty before COVID-19. Now it's common for patients of all



Dr. Marie Aydelotte, chief medical director and vice president of medical services for Jewish Senior Life. (Provided photo)

ages but particularly helpful to nursing home and assisted living residents. Telemedicine saves time and keeps frail residents safer because they don't have to travel and they aren't potentially exposed to other illnesses.

- Video visits with family: Born of necessity, Facetime and Zoom chats have helped out-of-town families as well as nearby families stay in touch and could be an alternative during flu season.

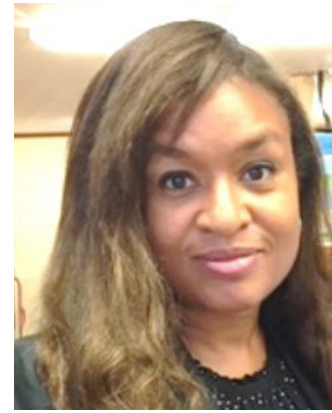
- Single rooms. The trend started a few years ago not as a nod to resident lifestyles but to give homes more flexibility when accepting new residents and as way to reduce spread of infections. Now they are seen as a way for homes to help keep residents safe from COVID-19.

- Cohorting. Larger homes that had the space had been grouping residents who tested positive away from the general population, and that practice may continue as a way to contain other contagious diseases.

- Personal protective equipment. Face-masks, gloves and gowns could become as common as linens and towels in the supply closets and likely could be part of the staff uniform.

- Easing of regulations for rehabilitation services. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services waived the rule that required people needing rehab to spend three midnights in a hospital. That meant people already in a nursing home could stay there and start rehab.

The prohibition against visitors has been the most disruptive. Even though Gov. Andrew Cuomo has said that homes could have physically distant, in-person visits if the facility had not had a COVID case in 14 days, it can be a challenge for facilities to hit the mark. The strain from lack of contact for residents and families is showing.



Laryssa Johnson (Provided photo)

Laryssa Johnson of Pittsford had not seen her mother in person or been able to touch her in more than 200 days.

"I know what they're trying to do, they're trying to keep everybody safe," she said. "But at the same time ... the residents are confused. You see somebody through a window, the resident thinks, Where am I, jail?"

Johnson is a member of New York Families for Visitation Now, which is trying to get the state to designate at least one family member as a compassionate caregiver for their loved one, similar to what is allowed for residents receiving hospice.

She said the group would like to see a compassionate care visitor have the same access as an aide.

"We could be great supplemental caregivers," she said. "We'd keep the mental stimulation going and whatever kind of hygiene we might do."

If that doesn't work, Johnson said, some families are looking at other options.

"A lot of us have looked at the classifieds so we can get a second job to see our loved ones," she said. "That's not a joke. What you do you have in the cafeteria? I can do that. Hairdresser? Might take me a couple years. ... Psychiatrist or social worker, that could take a while. Last week, I was so upset I did want to do the cafeteria one."

The last few months have underscored the importance of social and emotional health for residents, and how COVID-19 brought about the need to balance safety with quality of life.

"Nursing homes are going to learn how to do it better," said Aydelotte of Jewish Senior Life.

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