

Keeping People Connected: Innovative Methods Using an Infection Prevention & Control Mindset

The COVID-19 pandemic will remain a considerable threat to residents, patients and staff in long term and post-acute care until there is a vaccine and/or additional courses of treatment. Providers must adapt to this new normal in order to keep residents engaged physically, emotionally, and socially. Specifically, residents and patients need to be able to visit with their families and friends, as well as each other. Throughout this pandemic, providers have been using new ways to connect residents and patients with their loved ones remotely, such as through the use of technology. As communities at-large adapt to changing circumstances it is time to use additional, innovative methods to reconnect residents with the things they love to do and the people they love to see. Providers can use an infection control and prevention mindset to help come up with innovative methods of keeping residents connected. Below is a list of ideas to start the innovative brainstorming process.

Many basic infection prevention and control practices when followed consistently will reduce the risk of spread. Note these should apply to everyone in the building staff, residents, visitors, etc. since we know upwards of half the people infected with this virus and are infectious do not have any symptoms. We know that the virus spreads from small droplets created by talking and can be increased in number by more forceful exhaling such as coughing, sneezing, singing, or yelling. Hence the importance of both source control masks and keeping one's distance from others. We also know that the virus can spread from surfaces often from one's hands to others or to yourself after touching surfaces with the virus on them. Touching one's face can pick up the virus onto one's hands which can be transferred to others. Thus, washing one's hands frequently including after touching one's face are important. Decontaminating surfaces frequently touched by others or potentially exposed to the virus is an important way to limit the potential spread.

The Infection Prevention and Control Mindset helps to keep in mind the simple things to reduce the risk of spread. Those include:

- **Screening** of all personnel and visitors for signs and symptoms of illness.
- Exercising proper and frequent **hand hygiene** (hand washing for at least 20 seconds with soap and water; hand sanitizer when hand washing is not available)
- **Covering mouth and nose** with a cloth face covering (mask or bandana)
- Practicing **social distancing** (at least 6 feet away from others)
- **Cleaning and disinfecting** frequently touched objects and surfaces – in residents' rooms, shared spaces, and before and after group activities
- **Posting clear signage** that encourages social distancing and denotes that visitors who violate social distancing and infection prevention and control strategies may be asked to leave and may be denied future access until willing to comply with safety measures.

Innovative methods of connecting residents while following the Infection Prevention and Control Mindset, include:

- **Use outdoor spaces.** The use of outdoor spaces are not prohibited by current CMS guidance on the restriction of visitors and can be done now and are an optimal spot to

have resident/patients and families spread out and to connect, talk, share, and bask in fellowship once again. Not all facilities will be able to use this approach but those that can, should consider setting up such spaces. Some approaches for outdoor spaces include using:

- **Open outdoor courtyards**
 - This may require creating a new entry way into a gated outdoor courtyard area.
- **Outdoor open spaces** around the building such as parking lots or grassy areas under a tree
 - Keep in mind that all visitors, resident/patients, and employees should follow social distancing practices and use of source control masks. This may require limitations on the number of people permitted in courtyards and configuring the open spaces to properly support social distancing such putting up barriers, lines on the ground, chairs spaced apart with tables in-between or any visual and physical clues to prompt social distancing.
- **Use indoor spaces.** This may require approval by state as part of the state “reopening plan” that incorporates CMS & CDC guidance. Some ideas include
 - **Developing “see through rooms”** - these new innovative rooms are developed out of clear panes of glass or plastic, and lumber, to allow for full visitation of loved ones while ensuring degrees of separation.
 - **Reconfigure the foyer** entry areas to set up social distancing spaces that may include visual and physical markers to prompt social distancing throughout the visit
 - **Reconfiguring common rooms** – dining areas, rehab rooms, activities rooms to allow social distancing to occur through the visit.
 - **Set up a resident/patient room for visitations** – a large resident/patient room could be configured to allow visitations with demarcations to assure distances are maintained throughout including entry and exit. Limit airflow blowing in smaller spaces as this has been shown to potentially spread the virus beyond the typical 6 feet recommended space. Source control masks on all will need to be used during these visits.

Begin to develop plans to invite residents out of their rooms more often. Some of these plans should be run by your local or state health department before implementing unless your state has issued revised guidance. Some approaches that incorporate basic infection prevention and control practices.

- **Facilitate social distancing during movement in hallways.** Hallways are typically 8-foot apart. This will require that hallways are free of clutter and objects. Create arrows on the hallway floors/walls that direct resident/patient in the correct direction for ambulation and that reminds resident/patients to social distance from others. Create “time out” spots where one resident/patient can move to the side to allow another resident/patient/staff member to move past while ensuring the 6-foot rule.
- **Use source control masks.** Provide resident/patients who want to move about the center with a cloth facemask/handkerchief. Use of source control masks including

among residents without symptoms or who test negative for COVID-19 when out of their room is important prevention and control practice. This helps to reduce virus and bacteria particles from being expelled into the air while mobilizing about.

- **Create physical and visual demarcations** in common room areas to implement social distancing during activities. Consider placing markings on the floor, setting up chairs and tables with appropriate spacing. This will encourage all to self-manage their movements in respect for social distancing.
- **Allow a limited number of people** in common room spaces to support social distancing throughout the time in the space including entering and exiting the space. Consider creating a reservation schedule for this space if small groups of residents want to meet in the common space to visit together while socially distanced.
- **Many activities can be resumed** but remember to social distance all participants, staff, resident/patients and visitors. *All activities should practice social distancing and ask participants to wear face coverings to reduce the risk of spread.* This also helps to keep everyone informed and aware of practices each person can do to respect each other and take part in limiting the spread of the virus. Some ideas include:
 - Initiate a book club where resident discuss a book they have read at a safe distance from others.
 - Implement a knitting, sewing, cross stitch, and/or needlepoint social distance club where resident/patients can come together, wearing cloth face coverings, to discuss their work and socialize.
 - Start a four-corner quilting group. Have each resident work on a corner or separate square.
 - Physical exercise with Tai Chi, Pilates, yoga, and/or dance party.
 - Movie night. Pop in a movie of choice and offer popcorn or another snack.
 - Ice cream social.
 - Tea, coffee or happy hour.
 - Outdoor activities like gardening or mini-golf.

The possibilities for innovative and creative ideas to engage residents are virtually endless. Remember to engage residents, their representatives and their loved ones in brainstorming on ways that are meaningful to each resident. Consult local and state guidance when developing new approaches to follow any specific guidelines. Put on your creative hat and your Infection Prevention and Control Mindset and start implementing innovative ways to connect residents to the things they love to do today!

Visit our website www.CareNotCOVID.com to see stories of how providers are keeping residents engaged and share yours using the hashtag **#CareNotCOVID** on social media.