

**March 2021**

### **Assisting You with Reopening and Telling Our Story Together**

I ask you to think back with me about how we were viewing assisted living on New Year's Day, 2021, just ten weeks ago. We were concerned with several months of an intensifying uptick in Covid-19 cases. Cases were still increasing as we worried that social visits during the holiday season would lead to larger community spread. A small fraction of the Covid-19 vaccinations projected nationwide by 12/31/20 had been administered. We were anxious about how strong the uptake of vaccinations would be as we took steps to educate residents and staff on safety and efficacy. Staff were focused on confirming vaccination visits and securing authorization forms from residents, staff, and health care proxies. In the midst of this worry and strain, I wrote in this space of the [reasons to be hopeful](#), although in doing so I knew I was swimming against a strong current of overall concern and uncertainty.

Now, I ask you to compare that situation to our present moment and how we are viewing assisted living. By next week, all assisted living residences in Massachusetts will have had their third Federal Pharmacy Partnership Program vaccine clinics. Rates of resident and staff vaccination are surpassing expectations. As we look to data for indications of efficacy from nursing homes that have already completed all three clinics, we are heartened to see that, "new weekly positive covid test results among nursing home residents and staff members [have fallen by 89% and 83%](#), respectively." To highlight the impacts on the lives of individual residents, we shared this touching Dateline NBC video of [resident and family reunions](#) last week. There is much cause for joy and optimism.

Still, there is so much critical work to be done. Assisted living occupancy rates have not nearly recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Many older adults in need of the personal care and wellness provided in assisted living are sitting on the sidelines waiting for signals that it is safe to move in. Many more are struggling with loneliness and isolation and don't yet know of all the ways assisted living could reinvigorate them. And we can do more in partnership with the state to increase options for connectedness within assisted living residences by adjusting guidelines. We were pleased that many positive changes were made, thanks in part to our ongoing advocacy, in the updated EOEA consolidated guidance released this week, which you can access [here](#).

We had asked EOEA to make the following changes to the Consolidated Guidance for ALRs to improve the daily experience of assisted living residents Our requests were:

- To allow for residents to dine together with each table being six feet apart from the other but residents at each table not being at a required distance apart. This would allow residents to enjoy some benefit to their high level of vaccination by dining together, one of the most popular forms of socialization in assisted living. Given the difficulty some of them have with hearing it is important to the dining experience that they be able to communicate. That is a significant challenge for them today.

- To allow for vaccinated visitors to dine with residents, and for unvaccinated visitors to dine with the residents that they are visiting at a table with no other residents. Tables should be kept 6 feet apart in both of those forms of dining visits. This would help residents and their visitors have a form of social visitation that they can currently have outside the residence, to be done safely inside the residence.
- To allow that group activities continue to be done while masked but no longer required to be socially distanced, in order to help with hearing impairment and social connections.

We are thankful that EOEA allowed for most of these requests to be put into place as well as taking further steps in reopening by following the Massachusetts rules for restaurants in dining, gyms for exercise, cinemas for movies, and places of worship for religious services.

In the coming weeks, we will be engaging in proactive media opportunities for the assisted living community on the topic of Covid-19 vaccinations. One theme that we have focused on is that of overcoming vaccine hesitancy and how lessons from the Covid-19 vaccine rollout in assisted living can inform the broader public rollout. If your residence has had success in widespread vaccinations (at or above 80% acceptance among staff and 97% among residents) we would be interested in learning more about your efforts.

Please email [Christina Greenberg and I](#), if you would like to participate or have particular insights on this.

Our efforts will be part of broader messaging throughout the industry as we know that many assisted living providers will be engaged in their own efforts to communicate through public relations that assisted living offers a safe and healthy environment with a multitude of benefits. Importantly, we can begin to share the data and stories from residents, families, and staff, that assisted living is a safe and healthy environment right now. We will continue to shine a light on your residences by promoting them as an option in our [Resource Guide](#). I look forward to continuing to advocate for the best policies in assisted living and to tell our story together, with your integral participation.