

Lucas

Hey, before we get started here, we want to let you in on two big events you do not wanna miss. The first one is Senior Living 100. Bridge the Gap is going to have their studio set up interviewing influencers and bringing you more great stories and insights from the senior living industry.

Josh

And right after that, March 23rd in Dallas, those of you attending the NIC event, or if you just want to hang out with senior living influencers in Dallas, join us. BTG is throwing the senior living after party with the Dallas cowboy cheerleaders and two awesome bands you don't wanna miss.

Lucas

Check the show notes for links to RSVP to these events and find out more information. We hope to see you there.

Michele

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Welcome to Bridge the Gap podcast, the senior living podcast with Josh and Lucas. A great topic on today about disaster and emergency preparedness with a really great rockstar in the industry. We want to welcome Michele Seppels. She's the Executive Director at Balfour Senior Living at a Boulder, Colorado, and has an incredible story that you're about to hear welcome to the program.

Michele

Thank you very much.

Lucas

A lot of our followers are very active on LinkedIn and as I was doing my very frequent scrolling and looking and reading and engaging with people, we saw your story about the evacuation that took place from the Colorado fires. And you were just so transparent and willing to go into detail around the emotional process, just the actual process and the details around that. And I really feel like that it is something that our industry as a whole could really learn from. So many different executive directors and teams have been faced with power outages, hurricanes, flash floods, tornadoes, fires. And if anybody is listening and has gone through that, they know it is a major ordeal. We're dealing with a very a frail population, right? Depending on the their level of acuity. But these are our older adults and it's not as easy as, "hey, everybody get out. Right"

So Michelle, tell us about that day, run us through some of the timelines and the things that you were faced with when you knew that there may be a problem brewing with these fires and you might have to evacuate your community.

Michele

Absolutely. on the morning of December 30th I woke up and started my day kind of, as I always do. And as I was leaving the house, I noticed that my neighborhood was kind of in turmoil. There was people's lawn furniture was blowing out into the streets and stuff like that. And so you, I kind of started the day thinking, "huh, this is strange amount of wind," but you never sort of expected everything else that would transpire to take place. But around at 10:30 that morning we began to smell fire and smoke in the area. And it was kind of a campfire smell, which was strangely reassuring. But we started to get texts from some of our hospice partners and, and people who are more traveling in our general area regarding a fire about three miles to the southeast of us.

Michele 03:58

So we being to follow it. In our minds, we always want to make sure that we're prepared. But over the course of the morning we began to see more smoke, smell more smoke, and probably about 60 minutes after that initial smell of smoke we began to hear that the fire was starting to jump. I pulled together of our management team in a couple of our key players at around 11:30 that morning and said, "you know, let's pull out our disaster plan and just activate it." The worst thing that happens is we have a great practice today. The best thing that happens is we're, we're ready to go. So we began to just make our plan. We divide it and conquered and everyone sort of understood that at that moment, safety was going to be the important thing.

Michele 04:47

So our life enrichment team really took the task of making sure our residents were engaged through that very seriously so that our care partners could focus on packing everyone and making sure they have what they need. Communication became very difficult very quickly.

Over the course of the morning, I put together four different notifications to our families. And every time I was about to press "send," the circumstances would change. So it wasn't until about two 30 in the afternoon that we got the official evacuation order. But we are part of a campus of 400 residents, over 400 residents. So it was actually coordinating an evacuation over five different levels of care. So it was pretty intense.

Lucas

So your community is a CCRC?

Michele 05:34

I operate the memory care of our large campus, but we have an independent living, an assisted living and then an assisted living skilled nursing combination building on the main campus. And my community is about three miles away to the south, closer to where the fire started.

Michele

I see. I see. So this is not a 40 bed AL, this is a massive movement that needs to take place and sounds like a lot of coordination, and especially for you in memory care, extra challenges took place. What was the emotions like when the official evacuation came in? Did you find that you really moved into kind of like a, a flight or fight, like fighter leader mode, or was it kind of a panic?

Michle 06:24

You know, I felt very calm. As far as our staff, it was definitely, the biggest thing in our industry I think is always communication and culture. With our staff, we have to remember that they have two different aspects of life that they're maintaining and that's their personal lives and obviously caring about these residents that they all love. And I will say obviously working in memory care, I think you see the best of caregivers in loving those residents, which is great, but over the course of the morning, as people are beginning to worry about their house that's closer to the fire or something like that. I think there was some high emotions with our staff initially as we really developed our plan, it allowed us all to kind of focus on what was important.

Michle 07:13

I really didn't see any breaks in emotion until we were actually putting the last few residents on the bus and we were seeing those flames within three to 500 feet of our front door, was really when the staff started to say, "oh my goodness, I can't believe we did this." So it was definitely an emotional day, but I will say we all kind of reached a different place where we just have to go into go mode. And it's hard to focus on your own emotions in that moment.

I found myself actually the reason I wrote the, the piece for LinkedIn was to kind of process that after a week because it was really 24 hour days for the first several days. And when you're at that level of exhaustion and looking at the people around you starting to have as they're processing it themselves that mama bear instinct, and you sort of comes out and you need to process it yourself, so.

Josh

Oh my gosh. So Michelle, one of the things we were talking about right before we hit record is you and I both previously have been through major hurricane evacuate and that is traumatic. There's so much that goes into that for our listeners that may have never had to evacuate for anything it's always such an intense experience. I think of immediately typically with the hurricane, you've got some warning, right? You're seeing it coming kind of for days, and then you realize, "wow, you might be in the direct path." It's not like a panicked rush. It's intense, but you have some time. You had literally just hours and minutes from the time you figured out, "oh my gosh, we've gotta go" to, "you're out of there." Can you compare and contrast a little bit of the difference of like hurricane evacuation versus this experience?

Michele 09:07

Absolutely. I would definitely I would definitely agree with you as far as the the ease on your mind with the ability to prepare it. It certainly interestingly, I think it's hard and with the hurricanes, you feel a little bit like you're waiting for the bandaid, whereas with the fire, the bandaid is off and you're just rolling. I think from the emotional preparedness side, the hurricanes almost harder because you have people in that constant projection mode instead of, "we gotta do this."

I think from the preparedness standpoint, the hurricanes were obviously a lot easier to manage, but the emotional side was harder here. On the emotional side, like I said we didn't really have the opportunity, the luxury of indulging in those emotions. But on the preparedness side, I have to say it really is the reason that you want to have those drills.

Michele 10:06

Our days are so busy between building census, dealing with families, making sure we're communicating. Sometimes staff training can feel like the thing that needs to fall to the wayside, and truthfully this more than anything has demonstrated to me how powerful staff training is. Not only in teaching people what to do, but also how to think. The circumstances in something like a fire change constantly whether it's

transportation changing, in our case because of the timing of the fire and where they were putting barricades up, we actually couldn't get our second shift to the community. So again it's leveraging those relationships, making sure that you've built a culture where people want to be there for you and be there for those residents. And so it really is kind of a holistic picture of making sure that your culture is healthy, but also making sure that your training and your preparedness are healthy.

Michele 11:00

I have to say, I said it to my co-executive directors on our campus. We had a teams call during the course of the morning and kept that call open throughout the time that we were evacuating so that if we all needed to run back and just shout something to say, "I'm having this issue, who can somebody work on this for me?" We were able to do so. But truthfully after all of that as much as there's changing circumstances and there's the ability to look back and realize ways that you could be prepared, you also need to look back at your team and say, "we got everyone out." So in that regard, I give us a hundred percent. So you got to make sure you celebrate

Josh

Well, and this is I think such an awesome opportunity and a great example of the teamwork, the culture that you guys have, the training and the preparation that you had been doing and through a bad situation, how much good can come from this? Because I just think of now the opportunity, and obviously you're already taking the opportunities to educate others on one, what this experience is like, what you can focus on. So now that you've not had much time, I think it just a little over a month here, you probably haven't slept much in the last 30 to 45 days,

Michele

Not too much. Maybe a little less of when I did a startup, but this is a close second.

Josh 12:32

What would you say are some of the key takeaways that you would want to communicate to people as they are planning and prepping? Some of the things that you learned that maybe we don't often think of in practice time, but that really focus on these kind of things as you're going through those drills and making your plans and preparations. Is there anything that comes to mind?

Michele 13:01

Definitely. I would say one major thing would be, as I indicated a little bit before, teaching people how to think. My counterpart, Becky Seamers, who operates our accommodations, skilled nursing, assisted living, really made gave some great examples in her community, but I have a pretty similar practice with my staff. Rather than just talking about what we do, we talk about what goes wrong during the course of these different emergencies. Whether it's like we talked about transportation changing, or key systems going offline and stuff like that. It really is about teaching people how to think through those situations, but also expressing confidence in them so that they feel ready to make those decisions. You know, the reality is we can always talk after a decision about ways that we can improve that.

Michele 13:50

But the reality is if you help people think about, what they would do and help to facilitate those lines of thinking, you really do find that people grow confident and you help to build them into future leaders

that can do this as well. And that's one of my favorite parts of my job. So that's definitely one major thing.

I think the other thing is definitely more of a long term thing. And that's the importance of communication with your families. During the course of all of the fire starting and emergency services beginning to issue alerts, the phone begins to ring. Your phone is always busy in your community, but at that point you have regulatory agencies, other communities and families all calling at the same in time to try to find out what's going on and everybody deserves that information.

Michele 14:50

So for us, it was making sure that we had really good messaging going out. I met with my receptionist who was outstanding and just said, "these are the points we want to make. This is where we're headed. We'd love to have families meet us there." And kind of here are the main things.

I also follow that up with an email you know, just a simple email that says, "hey, here's where we are." Here's where we're going more to come. And it at least gives families something to hold onto. And then after we were all at our first location and safe, I did the same thing and I continued with a daily email or video call where I invited all of our families to join us every day until we were back home and, and safe at the community.

Michele 15:21

And the feedback that I got from families, just knowing what's going on, where people are, how they're doing, what we're working on that day? One day I went out and bought a whole bunch of hair stuff, and we just had like a manicure and hair day just to kind of get some normal and some, and some fun back and for families to see those pictures and go, "okay, my mom isn't at home, but she's doing okay."

It's the little things that become the big things in those moments. They can overlook that you've had to buy three toothbrushes this week because they know that the big stuff is taken care of. So I think communication is definitely something that I think is so critical and that our families are really looking for throughout that. And just as regularly as possible is really key.

Josh 16:09

I am always amazed in these crisis, the situations like what you've been through the hurricanes or maybe tornado damages. It's amazing to me because the commitment level of the teams to stay, even though sometimes they don't even know what going on, because I imagine your team all lived in this area of danger as well, and who knows, hopefully not, but some of them probably lost some things or had friends and family impacted. Sometimes they don't even know what's going on with their own family and they're sitting there providing care to others just very selflessly. And I know that's part of this kind of hero story. You're part of that hero story. What is that like now? You're oh, I guess over 30 days, 45 days or so past this, what's it like when you're faced with, "oh my gosh, now we've got to get people back to the community. Is that a really difficult process to gather things back and then get back into the community?"

Michele ([17:24](#)):

It's challenging in that there's a whole bunch of T's to cross and I's to dot and making sure that life safety approves you of getting back in into your community and and really making sure that the community is

ready to receive people. For example, we sustained minimal property damage, but to go through the community because our lobby was open for three hours while we were evacuating residents, the next day, the amount of soot that you encounter in the window sills and in strange places in the community and the filters that need to be changed and all the stuff that you need to make sure is ready to repopulate is definitely challenging. On the emotional side. It's really for, I think for anyone to it definitely providing, you know, providing to the line of care that I do in memory care.

Michele 18:13

It really is, you have to assess your resident population and your team population and make smart decisions. We ultimately had to evacuate in kind of stages. Our first stage was to go to a sister community in Longmont where we were able to find placement for all of our residents. And then we, in the middle of, we had to coordinate transportation and staffing to be deployed to those three different locations. And then ultimately we were very lucky in that our skilled nursing unit actually on our main campus actually had a vacant second floor that had bench shuttered. And we were able to move all of our residents to be back together. And our building was actually ready for repopulation. Probably almost a week before we ultimately chose to pull the trigger to go back. And really the reason behind that was that we saw so many trauma response behaviors in our residents that we felt the need to give them a sense of normal before we brought them back to their home.

Michele 19:11

And so for us, we saw a great deal of behaviors, elevated temperatures without explanation residents who would sleep in that first week after the fire for 14 or 15 hours a day, you know, past recollection of trauma, traumatic events and stuff like that. Definitely the way that we cared for our residents definitely had to change. There was certain speeches that I probably gave a hundred times a day to one resident throughout that period because that was what they needed to hear. But genuinely those were the moments that pulled us back together. So over the course of that, that week that we decided to stay together in one place, it allowed us to put together some resources for both our residents and our staff to make sure that returning would be triumphant.

Michele 20:00

And then we planned just an amazing day for them to come back to. We had a surf and turf flame mignon dinner and beautiful entertainment. And our entire sales team came and made sure that there liars and kind of that sense of triumph rather than coming back to something that was hard for our residents. So it's definitely worth that extra time to make sure that your residents are okay, your staff has had some rest and that you're ready to do it the right way. It's hard sometimes because moments like this are, you feel that need to act as normal as soon as possible, but sometimes you need to just let yourself and your team and your residents settle a little bit.

Josh 20:39

Oh, wow. That's good information. Lucas, you work hand in hand really closely and see this I think last year, even you were part of some major crisis with the Texas ice storms and so forth. So she's speaking a language you're very familiar with.

Lucas 20:58

I've been in the middle of more than I can count. Really the whole country in one shape, form or fashion it may not be hurricanes obviously in the northeast or in the mountainous areas, but it's going to be

fires. It's going to be power outages. It's going to be floods. It's going to be something senior living communities face every season every year. And this is great information for us to talk about Michele, your story and sharing this is going to help. This is something that needs to be talked about. And as we're about to enter into different seasons coming out of winter and into spring and in the summer, there's many things that people need to be looking at as far as their emergency preparedness. This is a great conversation to help that. We know that your story is going to be shared here on the Bridge the Gap network, but you're also gonna be featured as a speaker, I believe, for the Colorado Assisted Living Association as well. Correct?

Michele

It's a joint coalition between the Colorado, Arizona and Utah healthcare associations. So we'll be heading down to Phoenix in March with my counterpart, Becky from our skilled and assisted living community. She is actually helping to rewrite our policies on emergency preparedness and I'll be working with her on that as well. So we're excited to kind of take what we've learned onto the road and obviously apply it here at Balfour as well.

Lucas

Wonderful, great information. So to any of our listeners who are gonna be a part of that, make sure you connect with Michele. And for our listeners that aren't gonna be there make sure we connect with Michele in our show notes and connect to the story that she wrote. Make sure you friend her on LinkedIn. And if you have any questions, I'm sure that she'd be more than happy to help out. Great conversation. Thank you so much for spending time with us and sharing today.

Michele

No problem. Thank you.

Lucas

And thanks to all of our listeners for listening to another great episode of Bridge the Gap.