

Lucas: Welcome to Bridge the Gap podcast with Josh and Lucas on our special COVID-19 series. We're bringing on thought leaders to bring the best information to all of our listeners in the senior living industry because now we need each other more than ever. And as part of our campaign of just saying we want to be an encouragement to you because we do believe in you and everything that you're doing. And so we've brought on Meredith Mills, one of the best operators out there. She's had a big diverse background in senior living and her family business. Meredith, welcome to the program.

Meredith: Thanks guys. Sorry to see you under these circumstances.

Lucas: Exactly. Well you know, we're here together remotely for now. And you've taken time. There's a lot going on. We have a variety of topics to go through. But Meredith, you and your company, you guys are on the front lines. So bring us up to date about what you're hearing and what you guys are experiencing right now.

Meredith: Sure. So I'd say we've been in COVID mode 100% of the time for probably the last three weeks. And we're so lucky to have executive directors who constantly give us feedback from what they think we need to be doing to help their staff and coworkers feel supported. And I have an incredible team of former hospital chief nursing officers that are at the helm within our corporate office. But I think the phrase that comes up most often in my mind is, I don't know, I've never done this before. And truly the challenge is that nobody has ever done this before in our industry, in our world, we haven't seen a pandemic like this since before most of us were alive. And so we really appreciate that everyone in the industry and in health care overall has been so supportive of each other. And there's no, you know, proprietary information. Everyone's sharing best practices. They're also sharing mistakes and stumbles they've had that they want us to avoid. And our vendors and our advocacy groups have just been incredible in supporting us.

Josh: Such good information. Meredith, your team like many of the teams in the industry that we're talking to and hearing are really rising to the challenge, taking creativity and labor to a whole new level. Because of the commitment of all the individuals. You know, you were sharing with us before we got on the show, just a little bit even about balancing even the optics. You know, we're all working remotely. You're in the office today. Maybe you don't have to be in the office, but for the teams that have to be there, sometimes they need a leader present and that helps with the morale. And then tell us just a little bit, I love you or I'm discussing some of the cross training and in preparation, not only for dealing with the now, but just being prepared even for the twists and turns that this may take that we don't know. Tell us a little bit about what daily life there and balancing optics means to you all.

Meredith: Sure. So as much as we're trying to ensure that people who are nonessential stay home because protocol is changing literally day to day, and we're doing daily phone calls with all of our executive directors and with all of our home office core team in terms of just trying to figure things out and, and roll them out in the appropriate communication, we have kept our core team members coming into our corporate office. We're all mostly in our offices doing meetings virtually, but we do want to be available because our campuses are all within driving distance and if we have staff shortages and challenges where we need to be on site to support them we want to be able to mobilize our team quickly.

That being the case, we have had a lot of our coworkers who maybe haven't worked out in our campuses prior to being in the corporate level. We did a half day training so that they will be ready to go and understand fire safety, infection control, housekeeping, you know, how we would go about serving meals and things of that nature so that they can step in and support our teams in case we do have staff shortages, which we anticipate.

Josh: So amazing. And along those lines you know, technology we're finding out our industry is being forced to use technology more than ever, which is probably not necessarily a bad thing for us to get up our IQ a little bit. But you guys have been leading the way on some innovative new things. Tell us about some of the tele-health options that are out there that you're using, that you guys have formed and, and maybe some great ideas for our industry listeners as well.

Meredith: Sure. I think a lot of the large healthcare systems have had trouble figuring out tele-health for the Medicare set in the past. And we've been lucky enough to work with our really wonderful team of medical directors who have been providing telehealth and in person support for our residents for the past almost three years. So when they saw this wave of concern coming, many of the providers within the organization are former emergency room doctors and their whole goal is to keep seniors with chronic disease challenges out of the hospital and they believe that can be done with really good care coordination and preventative interventions. So when they saw this coming, they started to network with their other emergency room doctor friends. And the big fear is you know, really exposing people in the emergency rooms and calling up our emergency rooms and acute care hospitals.

And what, I've heard it from a lot of providers in our industry, although there's such a fear of accepting new admissions, right now, we have to recognize that we're not just hospitality, we're part of this healthcare system and we have a moral obligation to be a resource in a pandemic. And so in the same way these, this group of doctors said, we have a moral obligation to help the hospital systems help to offload the incoming volume that will, that we know will come. And so they've banded together and created a nonprofit organization MedicareTelehealthhotline.org and they can now provide tele-urgent care in every state for Medicare beneficiaries. They're not charging copays. And they are available not just for COVID reasons, but if your resident needs a prescription refilled or they're having a symptom, exacerbation of a chronic disease or they need an annual wellness visit, all of us should avoid exposure to physician's offices, emergency rooms, and urgent cares if we don't have COVID symptoms right now. So if we can offload some of that volume by using telehealth, especially now that the Trump administration has loosened the guidelines on that, all you need is FaceTime and you can get this service and get it covered by Medicare for your residents.

Josh: Oh man. So that's, that's such a great benefit. And you know, I know we're going to be seeing more and more of that. And so our team members are also facing a lot of challenges. You know, they're, they're stepping up. In most cases we're hearing great stories that less call outs, more time that they're spending. They've got obstacles to overcome at home just like we do even on a regular day, but now with a coven, many child cares are closed. And for all of us that's a big obstacle. Whether you're working remotely or whether you're going in on the front lines, like your COVID caregivers and all of the caregivers are out there. What are some of the resources that you guys are kind of thinking outside of

the box to kind of help your team members deal with some of these challenges and help them get to work?

Meredith: Sure. I think the major challenge is childcare. We know that our workforce is majority young, younger women or women. And you know, we certainly in a pandemic are worried about our children just as much as we are our seniors. I think the one silver lining about this virus is that it doesn't seem to affect children in as aggressive of a way as it does our older adults. And so we can all rest a little bit easier knowing we likely won't have serious symptoms in a child who has normal health, but at the same time, so many of our daycares have closed and schools have closed. And our caregivers who are naturally very empathetic people want to be there for their families and their children during the scary time. And they can't be at work without knowing that their loved ones are cared for.

And so we've really ensured that we're lobbying our state governors and our Congress people so that we can get daycares, at least open for healthcare workers, essential healthcare workers. And I know that thanks to Argentum bringing us together on a COO round table, we learned that some states like Minnesota are not only opening up childcare to healthcare workers, but they're funding it. And so I think that's a really bold move and something that a lot of states may not consider, but at least what we know about the disease is that even if children are sharing it with one another, they're already being exposed at home if their mother or father is a healthcare worker. So it's not upping their exposure when they're in close proximity. And I would encourage everybody to lobby your state governments to make this an option for healthcare workers. We don't know how long this will go on. And one of their only opportunities to get to work and feel safe and be available to our workforce is if they know that their children are cared for and that's our responsibility to lobby on their behalf.

Josh: Yeah. So true. And we have, as you mentioned, some great industry organizations that are kind of uniting in Washington and at the state levels. But they, from your experience, it seems like too, they need to hear from us, right? The providers, the individual providers?

Meredith: Absolutely. And I know it seems like it shouldn't be a priority at this time, but I would really encourage everybody to set aside one person on your team to be reaching out to all of your Congressmen and women because there are aid packages going to cruise ships, you know, industry right now in the airline industry. Well, we're going to be hit hard from this too. We know our revenue's going to go down. We know our medical bills for our staff are likely going to go up. We know that it's going to be an impact that's lasting even beyond just the virus being, you know, present because our industry will continue to have a stigma because of, you know, the one or two bad stories that happen that are bound to happen and people don't always hear all the good stories that are happening and how safe their loved ones are within our four walls. So I think it's really important right now that our voice is heard amongst all the other voices that Congress is hearing around not only financial support but also support of personal protective equipment, which we know is in very short supply.

Lucas: You know in addition to some of these resources we have heard from you, you know, Country Meadows, you guys have a nonprofit aspect of a fund that you guys have developed to help some of this. So in addition to all those resources, you also have that. Talk us through that and maybe help explain to some other operators that are listening, something that they could try to set up as well.

Meredith: Sure. So we have a nonprofit coworker foundation that we use ongoing to help coworkers in need if they truly are behind on rent bills or utility bills or their car breaks down and they need to purchase a car in order to get to work. We offer grants up to \$3,000 that are not, don't need to be paid back. They just are a grant that they can use to get through. Some of life's challenges. And we recently opened that grant up to also fun childcare. So we'll be using it during this time. But on a separate note, something that I was made aware of recently is that companies, excuse me, companies that sponsor childcare and pay for childcare for their coworkers can actually have a tax write off because of it. And you don't have to host the childcare on your site. You can contract with nearby centers. And if you are funding a portion of your coworkers childcare, you can write that off up to a certain amount. There's an IRS guideline for it, but it's very much legitimate. And I would encourage companies to look into that right now because if we can get our coworkers cared for in their family needs, then we can ensure that they'll be there for us. And our residents.

Josh: Love that. You know, and you earlier in our conversation you pointed out and alluded to so many people coming together right now and being a guest on our show and, and us knowing you pretty well, you know, that one of our favorite things to do is to talk about the love stories of our industry because that's not talked about enough. And there's a lot of those taking place right now. Put you on the spot a little bit. Any, anything that is really special that has stood out to you among all the heroes stories in your community or around the country?

Meredith: You know, I've been trying to really keep it together and stay calm, but the one thing that really brought me to tears this week, well, two things. One we've been trying to keep our home office, our corporate office out of the fields because we don't want to, you know, cross expose any of our communities. But my vice president of IT went out because we are pulling a channel on each one of our TV systems so that we can do live broadcast for activities because our residents are now being asked to stay in their rooms. And while this VP was out there and he just could not remark enough on the positivity, the team focus, the hopefulness, the, you know, happiness of our coworkers, that they were all so focused on the mission at hand and despite all the fear and all of the media and everything that's coming at them, they were just so focused on whatever we need to do as a team to get through this together. And that just really made me emotional because it reminded me how incredibly special the people are that work in this industry.

And then number two, one of our program managers took it upon herself to do a video of all of our residents asking people to stay inside and be safe for them. And she did a beautiful video of a bunch of our residents that I can share with you that really puts home the message. Okay. You know, you may not be worried about your kids getting sick. You might not be worried as a young, healthy adult about getting sick. And when we see all these kids, it's spring break being completely irresponsible and we know who it ultimately will impact. And so some of our residents put their voice out and one of our program managers just took it upon herself to do a, you know, a really touching video that we hope will encourage the public to do it for them.

Josh: It's so encouraging. What a great story and you know that reminds me as we are, have been talking on many of our shows so much about the teams, the heroes, the champions that are out there on the front lines and folks like yourself that are out there supporting them, leading them, you know, are such a

great opportunity for the residents, the elders that we care for to really take on a special mission and purpose during this time, to take that wealth of life world experience they've lived through. Many of them doubled the experiences. Not COVID, but many tough experiences in their lives. And to bring that wealth of wisdom and share that and in via be able to encourage the team members in creative ways like you just mentioned. What a great kind of multigenerational care concept and I love that you've painted those pictures for us. Meredith, thank you so much for all this wealth of information.

Meredith: Absolutely.

Lucas: Well thank you again. It's, it's very, very encouraging and that's one of the things that we want to say loud and clear to all of our listeners to their teams and operators is that we believe in you and that's the reason why we're doing this series to bring you the best information that we can as quickly as possible. So we hope everybody stays safe. Everybody stays well and has a great day. Thank you for listening to Bridge the Gap.