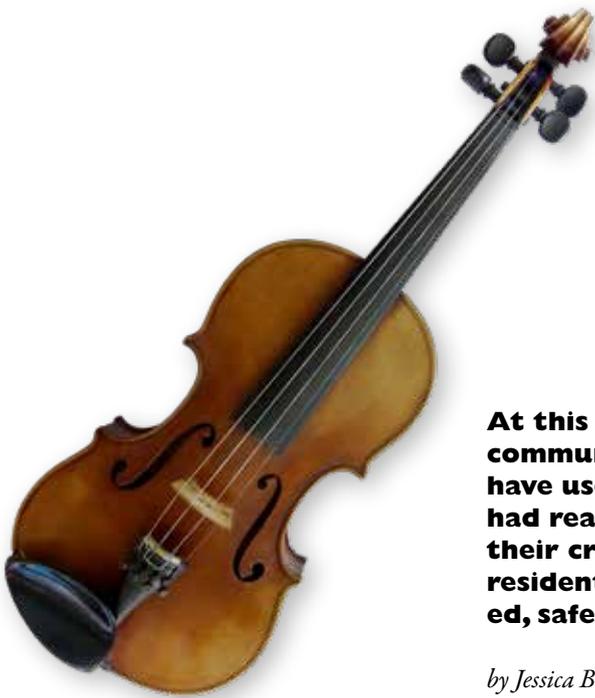


Technology:

Sharon Towers' biggest ally in resident well-being during a pandemic



At this North Carolina community, team members have used technology they had readily available and their creativity to keep residents engaged, connected, safe and well

by Jessica Bourque, LRT/CTRS

On March 12, life at Sharon Towers changed for our families, employees and residents. Like all life-plan communities, we were forced to make some significant changes to the way we operate to keep our residents and staff as safe as possible. Changes like mandatory masks for staff and residents, screening stations before management and staff enter the building

to work, discontinuing communal dining and all group activities, no longer allowing visitors on campus, and encouraging our residents not to leave our Charlotte, North Carolina, campus for any reason. To say it was a challenge would be an understatement—in fact, it continues to be a challenge even as some restrictions relax. However, it has been inspiring to see the innovation, creativity, flexibility and resiliency abound. Our team, residents, families and even our surrounding community have banded together during this unprecedented time.

Our mission at Sharon Towers is to enrich the lives of those we serve by providing a

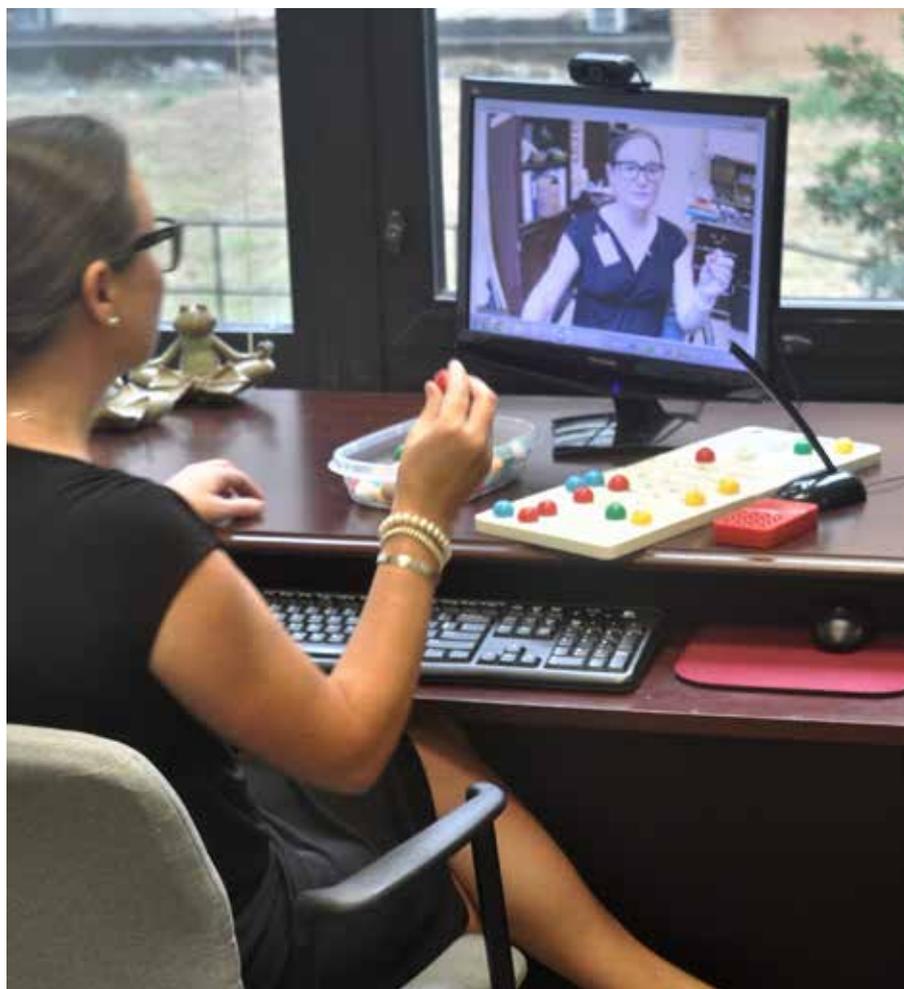
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*A local symphony musician played
an outdoor concert in June 2020 at
Sharon Towers in Charlotte, North
Carolina. The event was livestreamed
over the community's in-house TV*



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Director of Vitality and Well-Being Jessica Bourque calls bingo numbers during a game livestreamed over Sharon Towers' TV station

nurturing environment that fosters joy, purpose and well-being. In this changing COVID-19 climate, every department has had to reevaluate how we could best serve our mission. The question for our programming department—called the Vitality and Well-being Department—was how were we possibly going to meet the wellness needs of our 300+ residents without in-person groups/sessions, without a pool and without a fitness center? We instantly went from a robust calendar with hundreds of monthly offerings in every dimension of wellness to none at all.

We are lucky enough to have a great Vitality team comprised of exercise physiologists, massage therapists and recreational

therapists, as well as a chaplain and a music therapist, and many other talented individuals. It is amazing what you can learn to do when you have to—and we had to!

The biggest positive of COVID has been that it forced us to take a new approach and reevaluate everything.

A clean slate

So often in active-aging communities, we get stuck in a rut or pattern. We have literally had some groups at the same day and time for the last 10 years—the “Bingo, Bible Study and Birthday Parties” we never seem to shake due to tradition. COVID has allowed us an opportunity to start afresh.

Our first step was to evaluate what we had on hand that we might use as creative programming solutions. We safely assembled the team in our large auditorium with masks and appropriate social distancing, and we spent hours brainstorming together and basically performing a SWOT analysis, looking at organizational or program strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Brainstorming didn't stop after that meeting. It was exciting to be able to think outside that box. We were no longer limited by the monthly calendar or the “way things have always been,” so we switched to a weekly calendar format that allows us to quickly change things that aren't working and to easily try new things. Team members and residents are bringing new ideas to the conversation almost daily. The process has taught us to continue changing, growing and trying new things. Not everything works, and that is okay.

We started little by little. Every week we would discuss what was working and what wasn't, and we would tweak the calendar. We continue to do so each and every week.

Early in the pandemic, we quickly identified that technology was going to be our biggest ally for resident well-being and that we had a lot at our fingertips. We didn't have much time or money to spend on this major overhaul of programming. The great news is we were able to make some significant changes with things we had readily available—technologies like our in-house television station, Zoom, FaceTime, Netflix, YouTube, LifeLoop, Eversound, computers, telephones, tablets and more.

We started by offering classes from YouTube on the in-house TV, eventually teaching ourselves how to record and upload our team leading our own classes, and ultimately buying a webcam that allows us to stream live events. It took us months to reach where we are today, as it was a process of gradually learning new things along the way.

Virtual offerings via in-house TV

Our greatest asset has been our in-house television station. We have always had these capabilities, but only ever used this channel for a slideshow of daily events and to play in-room music. Now we offer a well-rounded blend of offerings on Sharon Towers TV (STTV), including:

- fitness classes like yoga, Zumba, cardio/strength, and balance
- mental fitness classes like trivia, live bingo and TED Talks
- meditation and relaxation
- daily movie matinees
- biweekly live updates with CEO Anne Moffat

Some classes are live and/or taped with our own staff members and some programs are from sites like YouTube or Netflix. Residents in every level of care are able to access this user-friendly technology because all they need is a TV.

One of our most popular events is an Outdoor Popup Concert. Those who are comfortable enough to come outside with masks and social distancing are welcome, and we also livestream the concert on STTV. This is helpful for our residents who are not yet ready to venture out to group events.

Another popular event is called Candid Conversations. This live group is streamed weekly on STTV and led by Chaplain Caroline East. She invites individual residents as her special guests each week to discuss their life, faith, values, and what's on their mind these days. The feedback has been fantastic. The resident guests are proud to share their perspectives and history, and residents who watch feel engaged and connected with their neighbors.

We have residents tell us they are now participating in fitness programs in their own rooms who have never felt comfortable coming out into the group setting. Initially, we had some apprehension about

residents working out unsupervised in their rooms, but we felt like it was a risk we were willing to take. Each fitness class has two team members—one showing the regular standing exercises and one modifying the class for those needing seated options. We encourage residents to have their phones and emergency pendants nearby, just in case they need help. We also provide many verbal reminders for taking breaks, proper technique and hydration.

We anticipate keeping some of our virtual activities after we return to regular programming. At this point, North Carolina's COVID-19 restrictions have gradually eased, but we are a long way from normal.

A Vitality Committee comprised of staff and residents is helping to guide our decisions about resuming activities. Our community swimming pool is now open to a maximum of two residents at a time, and they schedule times in advance via our LifeLoop platform (see below). Locker rooms remain closed. We have strict guidelines in place for the handful of in-person small group activities we offer for independent-living residents only—gentle stretch, tai chi and meditation are examples. Some of these offerings are available both in-person and virtually. We still hold fitness classes remotely, however, and the fitness center is closed for individual use.

Virtual tools for programming

Since March, we have used virtual communication tools like never before to provide programming. A Zoom Happy Hour takes place each week. Residents are so thrilled to see each other and have some type of socialization. Up to 35 residents have participated at one time in Happy Hour, which is led by a Vitality team member. Various staff members often join in as special guests. We have topics each week like "Show and Tell," featuring the fun and interesting things people can find in their apartments, or "Stand Up Night," where they tell their favorite jokes.



COVID-19 has meant significant changes at Sharon Towers, including use of personal protective equipment by staff

We are Zooming live bingo, music bingo and trivia (and even Zoom from the TV station to allow the less tech-savvy folks to join in). We are using teleconference for groups like Men's Club, Book Club and Memoir Writing Group. These groups chose teleconferencing for its ease of use. Teleconferencing has been around for a long time and all you need is a telephone—no computer, WiFi or fancy apps required. This was appealing to some groups.

Our goal was to have a variety of options, so all residents would have an opportunity to participate at their individual comfort level. One other perk is that these technologies also allow team members to lead some groups from the safety of home.

Virtual tools for operations

At Sharon Towers, we are using virtual tools widely to communicate with residents and family members, engage residents in

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Anne Moffat, Sharon Towers' CEO, reaches residents in every level of care with her biweekly live updates streamed over in-house TV

socially distanced programming and support medical care.

LifeLoop. We were already using LifeLoop when the pandemic started. LifeLoop is designed to streamline operations, work flow and communication—and the platform has been helpful in communicating the copious updates and changes. We had talked about going paperless for some time. But we kept putting it off, because we mistakenly thought our residents were not capable of or open to using new technology. This pandemic has allowed us to roll out that service. With this platform, we can now easily communicate with all 300+ residents and their connected family members without their having to come out each day and check their mailboxes for paper memos.

LifeLoop has also allowed us to easily adjust and communicate our ever-changing vitality offerings. Residents sign up for events safely from home. We set the group size in advance, and residents simply sign

up if there is space, with the platform helping us track attendance and control group size.

There have been some challenges with getting resident buy-in to this new technology. But the virus has the residents a lot more open-minded and with more free time to learn new things. They have really embraced LifeLoop. Our weekly Tech Support class fills up fast as they are learning to navigate the system.

Eversound. We originally purchased the Eversound listening system more as a hearing-loop alternative for our hearing-impaired residents. This system consists of one transmitter and 10 headphones. Whatever is connected to the transmitter goes directly to the headphones—microphone, computer, laptop, tablet, music, movies, etc.

As we started resuming small groups at social distances, hearing clearly was an issue for most everyone in the group. So Eversound has been key to successful engagement in these new group settings. Other communities are using this listening system to run activities such as hallway bingo, trivia sessions, guided meditation and musical programs, as well as to support safe visitation.

Telehealth. Sharon Towers' medical director and many other local doctors have switched to telemedicine when appropriate. This change has allowed our residents to stay safe inside their homes and not venture out into medical facilities at this time.

Virtual tools for connection

Our staff and residents are utilizing platforms like FaceTime, Skype and Zoom like never before to stay connected. The Vitality team in Health Care and Assisted Living are making 100s of virtual calls each month to connect our residents with their loved ones. Residents are attending weddings and church services, meeting new grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and celebrating all types of occasions remotely.

Recently, a resident turned 100 years old. That is a huge milestone, and we couldn't let it pass without some fanfare. The family delivered flowers, gifts and a corsage, and even had 100 cards from family and friends delivered. Her family stood outside her window with a giant birthday banner as they talked to her via FaceTime, and they were able to watch her open gifts and enjoy her cake via technology. It wasn't perfect, and it definitely wasn't how they would have chosen to celebrate this milestone. But it was special none the less.

Computers, smartphones and tablets

Most of our residents already owned a smartphone, tablet and/or computer, and they say that these devices are keeping them sane. Playing games, ordering groceries, connecting with family and friends—their devices are their lifelines. They are loving the virtual offerings that are readily available online now as well: virtual concerts, museum tours, Bridge/Card groups, for example. COVID has been a springboard for many of our residents to really embrace and explore these technologies that were already in their apartments, but often sitting around unused.

One of the biggest challenges has been meeting the demand for tech support services and education. New residents are coming to tech support each week with their devices and simply asking, "What all can this thing do?" They are asking about

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Resources

Eversound
<https://eversoundhq.com>

LifeLoop
<https://ourlifeloop.com>

Sharon Towers at SouthPark
www.sharontowers.org

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social media sites like Facebook and Instagram, Podcasts, Spotify, games, and most often about Zoom. We have as many as five team members assisting with this 1:1 tech support service each week, yet sometimes we can't get to everyone. We have had so many requests for assistance that our IT director actually bought a variety of books for our library. The residents can now check out titles like *iPhone for Dummies* or *iPad for Dummies* if they are interested in teaching themselves.

Opportunities to embrace change

COVID-19 has changed the way everyone is living their lives. This whole experience will likely have long-lasting effects on us all. As Sharon Towers' director of vitality and well-being, I think my main takeaway from this whole experience is that with creativity, innovation and teamwork, we can get through anything.

There has never been a better time for those of us responsible for programming in senior living communities to evaluate our offerings. I urge everyone to take a fresh look at that calendar. Are there technologies in your community that are unused or perhaps used below their fullest potential? Are you stuck in a rut and offering the same tired things you have provided for a decade? Are you discounting your older adults and thinking they aren't ready yet? Stop it! Embrace technology, embrace innovation, embrace change. Embrace wellness! 🍷

Jessica Bourque, LRT/CTRS, is director of vitality and well-being for Sharon Towers, a life-plan community in the SouthPark neighborhood of Charlotte, North Carolina. Bourque is a 2019 graduate of the ICAA Leadership in Wellness Management certificate course.

Images courtesy of Sharon Towers

Technology and innovation in culinary services

by Milton McGowian, MBA, FMP

When the news and dangers of COVID-19 became known in March 2020, Sharon Towers' culinary department was directed to develop a means of delivering food items to our 330 residents, while reducing their potential exposure at a public grocery store. Dining worked together to create an innovative concept that would keep our residents and staff from leaving the community and being exposed to COVID. We created the Sharon Towers Pop-up grocery store, which officially opened on March 24.

My team and I designed an online form where residents and staff select from various items, including milk, bread, meats, vegetables, laundry detergent, dish detergent and toilet paper, to name a few. Individuals choose their items and input their name, address and email address for delivery directly to their apartment, villa or cottage. Food items come from distributors who sell in bulk and deliver to Sharon Towers. Once the groceries arrive, they are sorted and delivered by the community's dining staff.

We have fulfilled more than 1,500 orders to date, and added one item that has emerged as the top choice among residents—bananas! Residents and staff are happy they don't have to go out to shop. Until COVID restrictions started to ease in North Carolina, people ordered food about twice a week; now they can order and have food delivered weekly. Our system continues to help limit residents' exposure to the virus. It also helps employees, because they don't have the time to shop since they're working all day. Residents and staff also pay a better price for their food with us. Because we buy in bulk, we pass the savings along to them.

After the Pop-up grocery was up and running in the spring, we took the same concept and created a Pop-up pharmacy delivery system. This system worked the same as the grocery delivery system, except we have partnered with a local pharmacy to deliver the requested items to Sharon Towers weekly.

With the Pop-up stores operating at full speed, our culinary team wanted to do more, so we took our fine-dining menu and created Allison's to-go specialty meals. This system allows Sharon Towers to take our fine-dining menu and offer it to residents in-suite. Dishes like lamb chops, filet mignon, salmon, lobster tail, and scallops are delivered in vacuum-sealed packaging to preserve the flavor. We pack these specialty meals in a special box with a Sharon Towers' logo bearing the name of the entrée. Finally, we add an instructional recipe card with step-by-step directions on reheating.

As of April 21, Sharon Towers dining has delivered more than 1,036 specialty meals, with 47% of our residents utilizing the program. This specialty dining system has allowed us to reinvent what we do and tell the residents, "If you can't come to our dining room and enjoy the food, we're going to bring it to you." COVID-19 has forced us to change our mindset on how we offer service, and this innovation has allowed us to show leadership in the senior dining industry.

Milton McGowian, MBA, FMP, is director of culinary services for Sharon Towers at SouthPark in Charlotte, North Carolina.