



COMMUNAL DINING IN A COVID-19 ERA

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FUTURE THINKING

ABSTRACT

Today's independent living communities face an increasingly growing aging population along with the threat of an unprecedented pandemic – one that's creating lasting impacts on the health of our older adults. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly one-third of all older adults live by themselves, totaling close to 13.8 million aging alone. [i]

With COVID-19 instituting mass isolation mandates, the effects of loneliness such as depression, malnutrition, stress, cognitive decline and anxiety profoundly increase.[ii] Studies show that loneliness in older adults increases the likelihood of early mortality by 26% to 32%.[iii]Communities that support this demographic must grapple with adhering to new regulatory safety standards while minimizing the risk of loneliness as older adults confine themselves to their apartments and homes.

For many, a senior living community that provides on-site nutrition, professional sanitation and medical care is the safest place for them to be during a pandemic. This kind of support system, with 24-hour assistance, offers residents peace of mind and security. How do communities re-frame and decentralize their facilities now to maintain the benefit of socialization, on-site amenities and support services as well as prepare for more permanent changes in the future?

INTRODUCTION

Consistent socialization, paired with full-support services, is unique to senior living communities. At the heart of connectivity and community, lies a memorable dining experience. Finding the balance between meaningful socialization and strategic separation is vital in keeping pace with resident expectations for independent living while controlling risk.

This white paper presents solutions to re-approaching communal dining in independent living communities to support socialization and mitigate the effects of loneliness.

An estimated \$6.7 billion in annual federal spending is attributable to social isolation among older adults.[iv] Poor social relationships were associated with a 29% increase in the risk of coronary heart disease and a 32% rise in the risk of stroke.[v]

KEY FINDINGS

While communal dining is still at the heart of engagement and socialization in independent living communities, major restructuring will need to occur to keep residents safe. Communities that incorporate safety-conscious programs will promote trust from their residents and their family members who remain on high-alert.

U.S. Population Predictions for Seniors and Children

Population values in millions

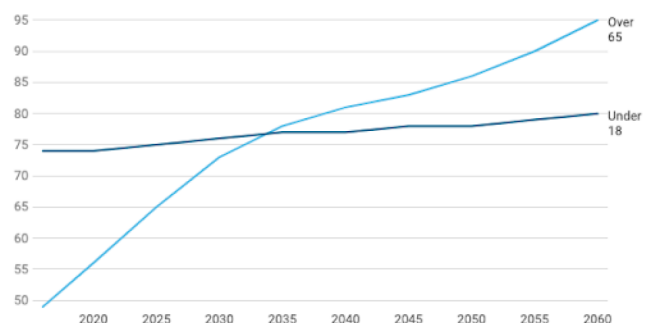


Chart: U.S. News & World Report • Source: U.S. Census Bureau • [Get the data](#)

U.S. News



CHALLENGES BECOME SOLUTIONS

Maintaining and building occupancy during a time when risk is heightened in populated independent living communities remains difficult as COVID-19 lingers. Protecting residents, clients, and team members translates to increased costs surrounding protective equipment, testing supplies and professional sanitation services. Yet, these hygiene services, readily available personal protective equipment, and on-site amenities are what make these communities attractive to older adults who want both the convenience and peace of mind of having on-site dining options, access to healthcare and clean spaces.

With older Americans less likely to utilize technology, and with many senior living communities closing their doors to visitors, the risk for loneliness and depression is on the rise. These communities have long emphasized communal dining as an opportunity for engagement and human connection. So, how can life-enrichment leaders reframe their existing communities now and prepare for more permanent changes in the future?

SOLUTION: USING TRANSPARENCY TO BUILD EXCITEMENT AND TRUST

Many residents are grappling with feelings of anxiety surrounding their increased risk of experiencing complications if they contract the virus. Strategically creating an atmosphere of excitement and trustworthiness that existed in a pre-COVID-19 world will aid in both maintaining and building occupancy.

President of Lifestyles East at Unidine Jack Silk noted, "In some of Unidine's partnered communities, chefs are holding Teaching Kitchens through Zoom to create engagement and fun for residents while also mitigating risk by maintaining distance." In other communities, Unidine has instituted mobile farmer markets that serve as both a wellness check as residents decentralize in their rooms, and an opportunity for interaction. Seeking out alternative choices for creativity, connection, and enjoyment will ensure a higher quality of life for residents.

With a pandemic that constantly outpours new information, new scientific developments and new public health guidance it's important that residents remain informed and aware. While there is a delicate balance between information-overload and mandate awareness, it's vital that residents understand the why behind the precautions to ease any confusion or apprehension. Instituting weekly, connect calls to keep residents aware and consolidate new information on the pandemic may be a way to ensure their compliance and understanding of safety precautions.



SOLUTION: OPEN- CONCEPT KITCHENS AND CONVERTIBLE SPACES

Older Americans are at a higher risk of experiencing malnutrition from feelings of anxiety and loneliness surrounding the dangers of contracting COVID-19.

Dining models that promote transparency and cleanliness standards build trust and can take several forms. An open-kitchen concept provides both a visual engagement for residents and peace of mind in seeing a team member prepare their food with the proper sanitation precautions. Communities that can accommodate an open-kitchen model will see an increase in mealtime engagement and lessened anxiety around food safety. For settings with non-flexible dining formats, incorporating cooking stations, mobile carts or an open video line into the kitchen may be alternatives to demonstrate transparency.

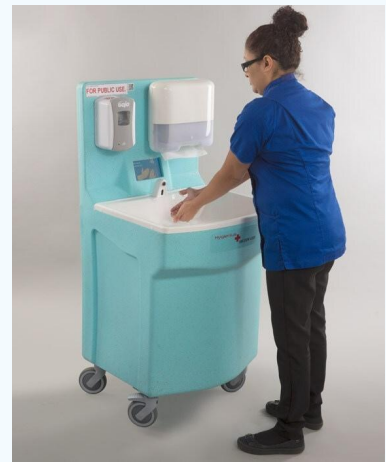
With the growing need for flexible spaces that can provide distancing practices and other safe communal activities, the future will look to design more functional convertible spaces. Continuing Care Retirement Communities are already experimenting with incorporating different dining formats into their mealtimes to complement the different flavor profiles of the menu offerings. If communities cannot ensure safe engagement with other individuals in a communal dining setting, administrators must look to other outlets to ensure residents will maintain interaction.



Grab-and-go "mini-market" format.



Mobile carts and an open kitchen concept.



Portable hand-washing station.

DESIGN FOR THE FUTURE

SOLUTION: FURNITURE OPTIMIZED FOR SANITATION

Out of COVID-19 came all-new safety protocols surrounding cleaning procedures. Choosing furniture is now done with a functionality-first mindset, and ease of cleaning over that of comfort and style. One of Unidine's design partners Chad Weiss, vice president at Elite Studio E, noted, "We are seeing an increased interest in furniture that is lightweight, compactable and nonporous so that it's easily-cleaned."

Functionality and flexibility in communal spaces will be essential in meeting the physical and emotional needs of residents in the future. Easy-to-move tables, modular dining formats and thoroughly cleaned surfaces are all desires that are no longer optional for the future of resident dining, but mandatory.

Weiss went on to detail the increase in demand for stand-alone hand washing stations to help mitigate transmission. The need for functional systems that act to promote cleanliness will only rise in the future.

SOLUTION: OUTDOOR DINING MODIFICATIONS

The CDC states that outdoor dining poses a much lower risk for transmission rates because of the increase in airflow compared to indoor dining options .[vi] This shift is evident in the restaurant industry's rapid conversion to an outdoor model with hopes of an earlier reopening. Outdoor dining is a relatively cost-effective way to reduce the risk for residents wishing to experience a communal experience.

Even before the contingencies established due to COVID-19, the concept of bringing the outdoors indoors was gaining traction among consumers. A study done by NASA found that house plants not only purify the air by converting carbon dioxide into oxygen, but they also eliminate the air of volatile, cancer-causing agents.[vii]

Having the option to utilize outdoor space will continue to be a draw for residents as they evaluate different senior living communities. Functionally, differentiation of space and a flexible living environment all speak to the expectations of aging Americans.



CONCLUSION

The challenges presented with the development of COVID-19 affect businesses across hospitality and service. Older adults benefit by way of both physical and mental health from the socialization that comes with the broader community in senior living communities. This pandemic provides an opportunity to rethink the way design and innovation can impact residents' holistic well-being and overall dining satisfaction. It has never been more essential to support older adults in escaping isolation with the benefits of engagement and socialization. Partnering with an experienced food and dining management firm helps senior living communities tackle the challenges of this pandemic head-on, insightfully and helps to ensure long-lasting success.

ABOUT UNIDINE

Operating in over 400 facilities, Unidine Corporation is a leading provider of food and dining management services for clients throughout the United States. Since 2001, Unidine's success derives from consistent execution in four key areas – an exclusive focus on food and dining management services, a commitment to scratch cooking with fresh, seasonal, responsibly sourced ingredients, exceptional customer service and a corporate culture enlivened by each team member's passion for culinary and service excellence. Unidine's network of nutritionists and culinarians leverage the latest research to support cultural enrichment and wellness strategies for senior living residences, hospitals and behavioral health facilities, and corporations. For more information, visit <https://www.unidine.com>.

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