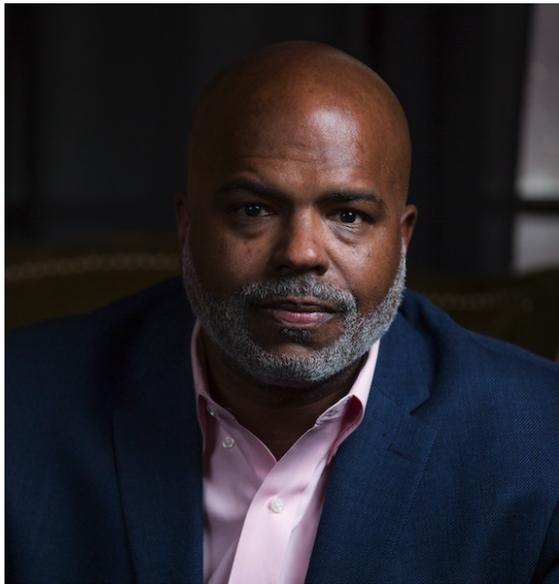
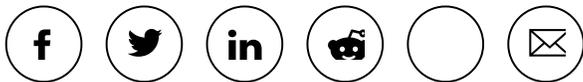


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Senior healthcare workers are the forgotten front line

[Jerald Cosey](#)



Jerald Cosey

The term “healthcare hero” is now widely used in describing hospital and other frontline workers taking care of COVID-19 patients, and rightfully so. People risking their lives to serve others is something special.

Yet, the narrative about skilled nursing teams has not been as positive as that of hospital heroes treating patients with coronavirus. But the good news is duty doesn’t require recognition. I know that senior healthcare workers are heroes, too.

After several weeks on the front lines of the COVID-19 battlefield, many senior healthcare facilities around the country were hit with a barrage of negative press. It was disheartening to read and hear as nursing home staff worked around the clock to care for our most vulnerable citizens, jeopardizing their own lives while caring for and protecting theirs.

It takes only one negative report to create a negative image and when that was done in media reports, it was extremely discouraging to skilled nursing facility staff. I know this feeling firsthand because my

facility was the recipient of negative press. But we pressed on. As my fellow senior healthcare facility administrator Tim Carter often says, “we don’t watch the news because we are the news.”

As the pandemic continued its havoc, I learned something else: families of those who are frontline workers are also heroes. As a person with a compromised immune system, my family had every right to fear for my life. And there were definitely concerns that I might be placing them at risk, too.

How does one answer young adult daughters when they feel “the facility” is chosen over “the family”? It takes a loving and supportive spouse to affirm their fear yet support their partner who sees a civic duty as a greater cause.

We pressed on, knowing that the senior healthcare profession is a way to serve God by serving our revered elders. During this pandemic, we in the senior healthcare field are also healthcare heroes. We are essential. We believe it is our duty to serve.

As COVID-19 hit our country, several hospital systems struggled with adequate bed space to treat the rising number of COVID-19 patients. Hospitals depend on discharges to open beds for those in need. But the flood of patients going into the hospitals outpaced recovery and discharges of those receiving treatment. Skilled nursing facilities took on the responsibility and risk of helping those patients continue recovery.

According to data collected between 2010 and 2016, more than 17 million Medicare beneficiaries were discharged from hospitals, 61% to skilled nursing facilities and 39% to home health, according to the March 11, 2019, issue of *JAMA Internal Medicine* magazine.

Skilled healthcare communities, which have populations dominated by seniors, knew we would be taking on the responsibility of continuing care of those recovering from COVID-19.

The day we confirmed our first COVID-positive case was an experience that I will never forget. Heading back to the facility that Saturday, I thought about every measure we had taken to avoid having this experience. I thought about the residents, their families and our staff. I thought about my family and their concerns.

Initially, few people in our communities tested positive for COVID-19. We had protocols in place, including quarantine plans. We took all precautions.

Just as the pandemic began, our facility was completing its state survey performed annually by the Indiana State Board of Health. The state survey is just one of several inspections of skilled nursing facilities which all operate in one of the nation’s most highly-regulated industries.

Surveyors check for the quality of our facilities, our operations and patient care. We had already been deemed a 5-star facility and recently received the AHCA/NCAL Silver Quality

Award for achievement in quality. We take pride in our ability to deliver quality care in a quality facility and it shows in our community. Our teamwork is stellar, so we were ready as the number of COVID-19 patients increased.

As demand for personal protective equipment skyrocketed worldwide, with hospitals rightfully having priority, we knew senior healthcare facilities would also need PPE [personal protective equipment]. Our procurement professionals worked tirelessly to acquire those resources, coordinating with county and state health departments seamlessly. Today, my facility alone has available thousands of masks.

On the federal and state levels today, there is discussion about testing all residents of senior health communities for COVID-19. We began testing all residents in April, quickly identifying those with COVID-19 who were asymptomatic. Imagine the coordination required to isolate not only those who tested positive, but also their roommates.

We have always maintained close contact with residents' loved ones, but during this pandemic, we knew we had to communicate even more because families could not visit their loved ones. Our goal was to make sure no one brought the virus into our facility. Fatigued from working long shifts like most of us have done since the pandemic started, Nikki, a nurse aide professional, proclaimed recently, "my residents are unable to see their families right now, which means I must bring extra love to work." I am certain that sentiment is and continues to be shared by senior healthcare workers across the globe.

Employees were assigned full time to call families of all residents daily. We found that reporting their loved ones' vitals and progress daily brought peace to the families we serve. Communication became a critical priority!

As we continue caring for our residents, with numbers of cases continuing to decline, I think of my elder friends who have lost their lives on my watch and the families to whom I have extended our condolences.

I think of the staff behind the scenes — from the CEOs to the IT professionals to the procurement departments to the maintenance, food services and laundry teams. I think about the hospice team, home health teams and vendors who made the choice to serve others. I think of the spouses and children at home accepting the fact their love ones are leaving the safety of home to serve others. I think about couples sleeping in separate rooms to minimize the possible transmission of an invisible virus.

I think of the sacrifices all of us in the senior healthcare industry have made during this pandemic. On behalf of my peers worldwide, we want it known that we are honored to serve through this pandemic. It is our duty.

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