

Safety and Security in Senior Living Communities

Senior living communities are constantly on guard to protect against safety and security threats. In a world where theft, arson, assault, natural disasters and any other number of dangers are all too real, anticipating the potential for harm and hazards is imperative.

Recent news reports from Dallas are a stark reminder of why an unrelenting emphasis on risk management is so important. In March 2018, a man was apprehended in the investigation of a woman's death at an independent living community.

He has been incarcerated since then and now faces 11 additional capital murder charges in Texas. In cases involving senior living communities, the suspect allegedly would pose as a home health care or maintenance worker.

Balancing hospitality and independence with safety and security is a complex proposition. During the American Seniors Housing Association's 2018 Mid-Year Executive Board Meeting, panelists exchanged thoughts on upgrading and tightening the oversight of visitor access, camera systems, background checks, resident unit protection, and on-site security.

Participants were Aaron D'Costa, GCP/True Connection Communities; Guy Geller, CPF Living Communities/Grace Management; Joel Goldman, Hanson Bridgett; and Charles Turner, Invidia for Seniors.

At the outset, the panel agreed that registering and screening visitors must go beyond simply asking them to sign a log-in sheet.

With a clear need today for active shooter policies and procedures in locations that are readily accessible to the public, and a greater emphasis on preparing for natural disasters such as tornadoes, floods and wild fires, senior living communities must respond in kind with precautionary plans, systems and training.

In assisted living where the need for extensive engagement with residents is obvious, safety and security measures are easier to implement with support from residents and families. Independent living, however, poses challenges where these measures could offset efforts to promote hospitality and maintain boundaries for independence.



Technology can ease resistance to oversight in independent living by employing cameras, fob systems, and electronic keys. These systems not only can measure how often residents interact with staff, but also provide an audit trail in the event of an incident.

But in many cases, these systems rely on proper use by residents and restricting use by non-residents. And enforcing policies related to this technology may meet with resistance from residents. Residents may prefer to leave the doors to their units unlocked, for example, which can lead to security breaches.

Electronic management systems stationed at communities' reception areas that screen and credential health care providers and vendors, and include a sign-in system for visitors received broad support from the panel.

Features typically include photographing visitors and third-party health care providers, notifying management via text or email when specified visitors sign-in, and listing visitors and residents who are in the community from a computer, smartphone or tablet.

Wearables are another tool. One panelist reported that an employee was terminated following accusations of theft. When a labor attorney challenged the termination, the operator provided videotape of every unit the former staffer entered and also included a heat map of the time spent in those units. No further legal action was taken.

One way to guard against staff infractions in resident units is by installing a security system for keys that apartment operators use. These may feature finger print scanning or facial recognition when staff sign keys in and out, thus avoiding the need for master keys.

Whenever technology is in place, its success hinges on training and procedures. And with staff turnover, retraining is a constant. Without processes and consistent compliance, technology is severely limited.

As senior living focuses on moving away from perceptions of clinical, institutional environments by promoting hospitality and residential settings, peace-of-mind nevertheless is vital. This requires significant investment to properly deploy new systems and upgrades.

The cost for camera systems was estimated in the low tens of thousands, with better pricing for newly constructed properties. Keyless electronic RFID locks run about \$300 per installation compared to a traditional door lock that costs \$120 to \$150 per installation.

The electronic management systems that screen and credential visitors are often paid for by charging health care providers and vendors fees for access licenses. However, some state licensing authorities will not permit such fees for home health, rehabilitation or hospice providers.

The backbone for so much of this technology is a powerful WI-FI system. This can reduce the cost for nurse call and camera systems by avoiding the need for wiring and other hardware. But in older buildings, WI-FI installation costs often exceed the cost of the systems WI-FI supports.

Safety and security challenges are compounded in independent living and assisted living communities that have a large footprint with multiple entry and exit points. Residents occasionally prop these exterior doors open to access their cars or move items in and out of the building.

Cameras stationed at these access points provide video that can be shared with residents when explaining the dangers of leaving entryways propped open.

Another distinction between assisted living and independent living is the level of staffing. In independent living, staff typically are very familiar with the residents and their routines. But staff doesn't engage with them day-to-day the same way they would in assisted living or memory care communities.

This raises questions about manpower and the proper amount of oversight at independent living properties. In older communities where it is more difficult to implement technology upgrades, security personnel provide peace of mind for residents and family members.

Some panelists use security personnel on the overnight shift, while others contract with third parties to conduct random patrols at their properties.

Feedback from residents and families has been encouraging. The presence of someone in a uniform is reassuring and is yet another level of deterrence to discourage unlawful activities.

Background checks are routinely conducted for assisted living personnel. But independent living staff may face less scrutiny, while typically very few background checks are conducted for senior living residents.

One panelist commented that a limited number of resident-related infractions have arisen, and when they have, it usually involves resident-to-resident confrontations in memory care settings. On the other hand, family members such a grandson with substance abuse issues may engage in theft or other illegal activities on a community's premises.

Resident background checks raise thorny issues related to liability and discrimination. For example, if a new resident with an incident on record from five years ago moves in, while another individual is denied residency because of an infraction from three years ago, will there be a lawsuit?

Another panelist, meanwhile, reported that residents at some properties are able to request that their communities run background checks on third party health care providers and other individuals.



Credit checks are another option for screening potential residents. In the case of CCRCs, they typically conduct credit checks and financial screening, while apartments require credit checks.

Senior living residents have been known to move into a community and after being evicted for nonpayment, move to another community for three or four months before another eviction ensues.

Panelists concluded their discussion by agreeing that there is no standardized solution to preserve safety and security. Emerging technologies offer what are often cost-effective systems to upgrade communities' oversight, and the success of safety and security measures hinges on policies and procedures that are strictly adhered to with ongoing training.