

Good afternoon. I would like to first thank each of you for this opportunity to share my COVID story. I am Linda Givens, Executive Director/Administrator of La Vida Llena. I came to this position after 28 years in a hospital environment. La Vida Llena is a 500-bed continuing care life plan community. We have all levels of care and were the first community to be hit by Covid. I am also a New Mexico Health Care Association Board member.

La Vida Llena is a robust community where socialization is key. When I speak of life plan community, what pictures come to your mind? For me I think of, fitness classes, entertainment, lectures, celebrations, laughter, animals, engaging staff, and satisfied families, all the qualities of a happy home. This was my community 18 months ago. We were celebrating the beginning of a major construction project which consisted of a new Assisted Living building, 40- new independent apartments and were beginning to renovate part of our Healthcare unit to have private rooms.

Then COVID hit and it hit hard, our community and lives were forever changed. We had no idea how it got in our community as we were compliant with all the requirements DOH put in place for screening everyone that came through our doors. When we discovered we had 27 staff and 23 residents positive mostly who were living in our Healthcare unit we felt immobilized. Staff had to immediately walk away leaving myself, the infection control nurse, and our Dietary manager, 2 nurses and 7 staff to operate a 50-bed Healthcare unit. This was a new disease, and we were operating in uncharted waters. No one was prepared for this disease and the trauma that it has caused to staff, residents and families.

This was new for the media also and they used this opportunity of our story of being the first community to sensationalize a story, much of which was misinformation. the lasting negative effects of their reporting gross misinformation has been astounding. We had vendors that would not come onto our campus, this left residents isolated and without cable television services for long periods of time. Our staff would go to the grocery store to pick up groceries for our isolating residents in our vehicles and would be verbally

assaulted by people, saying “why are you out, you need to stay home”. A local chain pharmacy told independent residents they didn’t want them to pick up medications or shop there. Our postal service and FedEx left mail and parcels at our front door for a year. Staff had to learn to sort and distribute mail to all our residents. La Vida Llena has 28 doors for entrance. To secure the community we had to hire a security company to stand guard at our front entrance for a year that cost us \$1,000,000 +.

The Healthcare unit was separated from the rest of the community but due to construction, the only entrance was our front doors. Many of our positive residents were asymptomatic and were now isolated in their rooms. We were informed that the facility staff were required to wear specific PPE, the very expensive kind of PPE that you would only see in an operating room while taking care of residents. In my tenure with La Vida Llena, we had never used agency and I was finding myself with new challenges, desperately trying to staff who would be willing to work in the unit. I contacted some agencies and because of the negative media they would not come. I finally found an agency that had resident aides not CNA’s, which is required by regulation, that would come and assist. I also found an agency that would supply nurses, but all this help came with an astronomical price tag of \$120/hr nurse and \$65/hr aides. It was all hands-on deck, and I found myself helping feed residents in addition to the many other daily tasks I needed to attend to. Communication was key, information was coming at a rapid rate, and I found myself sending out mass communications at least weekly and often daily. There were long hours, and the days ran into each other, but the hardest thing I had to encounter was the death. Many of these residents did not show signs or symptoms of COVID except for the very end and they were refusing food and water. I remember the day we lost 3 residents one right after the other. These memories have left physical and emotional scars on all of us. I, as well as many others, felt like we were working in a war zone. I had no time to grieve the losses as I had to be the emotional strength for my team.

With the help and support of Cabinet Secretary Katrina Hotrum-Lopez and Deputy Chief Brian Rose, we were able to understand the importance of correctly donning PPE on and off, how to effectively have a hot zone, and the importance of having only dedicated staff working with our designated positive residents. Every day, even now I am constantly reminded of the outstanding job my staff did to ensure the safety of our residents, and I was honored to be presented with a medallion by Brian Rose, thanking me for my leadership during a crisis. This award met so very much to me. The inscription states: Providing Exceptional Service to our Community's Diverse Needs.

COVID had a huge impact on our construction projects also. We lost on-site time with workers getting sick, the construction supply chain left us scrambling for supplies with a now much higher price tag. We needed a generator for our Assisted Living building in order for it to be completed. The original generator was ordered overseas and is still sitting somewhere to this day, undelivered. To meet our deadline for completion of the Assisted Living construction, we had to purchase one that was located closer, and our price went up \$25,000. To expedite our original construction process, we had residents living in a rented living space for an anticipated time of one year. The time delays are costing us \$100,000/month and currently we are 6 months out with these expenses.

We, as a community, have stepped up to the challenge of caring for all of our residents because of the passion we have for taking care of seniors. We have had to operate with unanticipated, extremely high costs related to mandated PPE and a required 24-hour screening control process and yet our occupancy rate has hit an all-time low. We have accepted the new mandates for infection control, participated in setting up vaccine clinics, we test staff and residents regularly, we are the watch dog for visitors, all the while working short-staffed in all areas of the community. As a NMHCA board member, I have met with our Governor to request additional funding in order to help all our long-term care communities with

the additional burden of continual loss of staffing, PPE supplies, and the increased pricing of supplies in general.

We acknowledge and appreciate the support the state has given us with PPE, staffing, and training on infection control as we are better prepared to take care of this vulnerable population.

With our recent mandate of all healthcare employees being vaccinated, even as we understand the importance, we were acutely aware of how this mandate might affect the already critical shortage in staff we were and still are experiencing. We are now faced with another dilemma of exempting our staff who oppose this mandate. Since we are all vying for the same kind of clinical staffing pool, we are faced with egregious challenges of where we will get the staff to take care of our residents. How are we going to pay them a comparable wage (having to compete with hospitals) with Medicaid reimbursement rates being what they are? It is imperative that we have the financial relief to be able to sustain the quality of care these susceptible residents deserve and to be able to keep our doors open to take care of the frail elderly in NM. **La Vida Llena supports the vaccine mandate however, Without COVID related relief funding for long-term care facilities, it is only a matter of when, not if, some of them will have to close down, unable to sustain the financial impact that COVID unleashed on us all, especially in our rural areas. With all the incredibly huge challenges, barriers, sickness and death we have faced these last 18 months, the facilities of NM will continue to take care of and provide services to improve the quality of life for all of our residents in NM.**

Thank you again for listening to my story.