

Date: December 23, 2021
To: Residents, Families, and Friends
From: Gustave (Gus) Keach-Longo, President/CEO

RE: COVID-19 Update

Folks, I know this is a long message. Please read this carefully, as I am sharing a lot of important information to help us stay safe over the next few weeks.

As you all know, we continue to monitor available information regarding COVID-19 from various sources then develop strategies and plans to help protect our unique community as much as possible. Over this past week I have grown increasingly concerned about the new Omicron variant. Within the past few days this variant has spread so rapidly that I feel we must take action to help “flatten the spread’s curve” once again. This is similar to what we were experiencing last year at this time, yet with some different risks.

Though I hear some conflicting information, Omicron seems to have just become the dominant variant in our area. If that is not fully accurate, we know that it will be within a matter of a few more days. The good news is that it seems to be less severe than the Delta variant when individuals are “boostered.” Thankfully, a large majority of our community was boosted when we had our vaccine clinic in October. For those who are not boosted now, I could not express enough how important it is to be “boostered” now. If you are not boosted, consider yourself at risk of becoming significantly ill. I am hearing ranges from 70 to 90% of those currently in critical conditions and passing away are the unvaccinated. For the few who have chosen not be vaccinated, regardless of reason, you are in my thoughts and I wish you well.

We can reasonably assume that soon the Omicron variant will make its way into The Towers. There is no way to fully prevent this from happening with the number of caregivers, team members and visitors who must enter our building each day to keep our residents healthy. We are preparing for this and will be reinstating some of our protocols that worked well in the past and kept prior variants from spreading within The Towers. I will share those measures below.

As we all have learned, people who are fully boosted are the most protected from contracting COVID-19 with the Omicron variant. Thankfully, The Towers has remained well-vaccinated. Even for those who may still contract COVID, most cases experience mild symptoms and are at much lower risk of hospitalization and/or death. These factors have me less worried about the initial effects of Omicron on our residents and our community. It is true that because of our vaccinations, the effects of COVID/Omicron is less concerning to our overall safety at The Towers.

However, due to how extremely contagious Omicron is, I am concerned that once introduced into The Towers, it may be harder to control. We know we will experience some cases. We may also experience some spread, despite our best efforts. At this point, I am still not as concerned about this because we are better protected from severe illness than ever before.

What I am now worried about is what is happening within our hospitals and specifically our emergency rooms. Even though Omicron is less severe, there still is a small portion of cases that will need medical assistance to get through the worst part of symptoms (e.g. oxygen). With the strongly anticipated post holiday spread, the surge on emergency rooms is projected to overwhelm the healthcare systems beyond what was experienced last year. I am sure many of you have heard that some projections are a range of 400K to 500K people a day contracting COVID by the end of January.

With the very likely saturation of the emergency health system, the Omicron variant poses a different kind of threat to our community than Delta, or others, before them. Due to our unique model at The Towers, there are significant limits on the amount of care that our caregiving partners are able to provide onsite. It is common for an average of 3-5 residents each day to be transported to the local emergency rooms to be “checked out.” This occurs regularly due to slips/falls or when a resident experiences some sort of unusual discomfort or pain. This also occurs when someone becomes very sick with something beyond the normal routine seasonal cold (e.g. influenza) and requires additional skilled care due to other health complications.

My primary worry is not Omicron per se. My concern is for any resident who becomes sick enough to need more care than can be provided onsite. Emergency room care is likely to be limited or unavailable throughout January and the first part of February if the COVID surge occurs as predicted. Therefore, I believe our best approach is to take measures now to “flatten the holiday curve” similar to what we did this time last year.

We are instituting the following changes and protocols, effective **Friday, December 24**.

Suspension of In-Person Dining

Dining is the activity that is the most worrisome, as we need to take off our masks to eat. Effective Friday, December 24, all in-person dining will be suspended and all those who have purchased meals through one of our meal plans will have their meals delivered to their apartments. If you are not on one of our meal plans and would like to sign up for one now, you can call Jeremy at 203-772-1816 x115. If you are not on a meal plan and would like to purchase a meal to go, please contact our kitchen. You will need to pick up your order and pay for your meal at the time of pickup.

Residents are Welcome to Come out of their Apartments

Unlike last year, residents are welcome to leave their apartments at any time. If we all consistently wear masks (covering both our noses and mouths), we can safely interact with our friends and neighbors. So, please do not stay in your apartment. There is no need to feel isolated again. Please feel free to join us downstairs for activities.

Furniture in Common Areas

Our risk is too high anytime we spend time together with masks below our noses. Being fully honest with ourselves, we have all become very lax with our mask wearing. This is only natural given how long we have been having to wear them. Unfortunately, as we relax and hang out with our friends, we tend to pull our masks down so we can speak more clearly and be heard better. However, over the next month, we must become more diligent with keeping our masks on and up!

At this time our team has decided to remove all the furniture in our common areas to discourage residents from congregating in groups and lowering their masks to be more comfortable. This may feel extreme to some, but it is one of the protocols that helped keep us from spending long periods of time close together while unmasked. Though we want people to be social and see each other, anytime residents gather without a team member present, the tendency of lowering masks has become too common. So for now, informal groups gathered in our common areas will be lovingly asked to “move along” by our Front Desk Officers. Please respect their efforts to keep us safe during these critical weeks. I am hoping that this will just be through the month of January.

Programming

We know that we can provide in-person programs safely. Our team members will set up programs with social distance, air purifiers (specific for COVID) and will monitor residents to emphasize proper mask wearing. At this time we will require masks to be worn during every program. Unfortunately, residents who refuse to wear masks will be asked to leave the programs for the safety of themselves and others.

Visitors

Receiving visitors is an important part of staying healthy and socially connected. We will continue welcoming visitors into The Towers. However, we ask that all visitors be extra diligent about keeping their masks on properly (noses and mouths) and not congregate in any common spaces. We ask that all visits occur in individual resident apartments. This is important, as it would help focus our contact tracing efforts if there are any suspected significant exposures. For now, the protocols at our entrances remain the same; show vaccination cards (and boosters) or a negative COVID test administered within the prior 7 days to enter our building. They will change as of January 11th.

Restarting Weekly COVID Testing (January 5th and 6th)

We will be reinstating our weekly COVID testing protocols with Murphy Medical. The following practices will remain in place through the end of February:

New Testing Procedures

Murphy Medical Associates will administer rapid tests and process the results onsite at The Towers. We can reasonably rely on the accuracy of these tests now. If you recall, we were very concerned about using these tests in the past. Since our last testing effort, the accuracy of these tests has improved greatly—especially when administered by trained professionals.

Short swabs are used and processed in a machine that will be onsite. Results will be shared with you by Murphy's team in approximately 30 minutes. Any questionable results will require an additional test. Murphy's team will collect a second sample with an additional swab and send it to his lab. Results take about one day. During that wait for results, a resident will be strongly asked to remain in his/her apartment and any caregiver/team member/visitor will be asked to leave The Towers immediately until the results are known.

Murphy has assured us that there will be no direct expense to residents or others being tested at The Towers. If you have questions, please contact Murphy's office at 203-392-1156. Please know that you may elect to be tested by providers available in other locations. Please remember to plan the day of your testing to be in line with our new protocols to enter our building as of January 11th.

Resident Testing Wednesday, January 5th (8:30a – 5:00p)

- Residents remain in their apartments until tested and “cleared.”
- Once “cleared” by Murphy's team, please feel free to go on with your day
- We are not sure how many hours this new process will take.
- Please be patient and gentle with the Murphy folks as they figure this out.

Caregivers/Team Members/Visitors Testing Thursday, January 6th (8:30a–7:00p)

- Testing will take place in the Dining Room.
- Plan to stay for your results so please plan for one hour.
- We do not know how many people will be tested with us versus somewhere else.
- If results are potentially positive, a PCR test will be used to confirm.
- If potentially positive, please know that you will need to leave The Towers building as quickly as possible until PCR test results are confirmed the following day.

- This may affect caregivers' ability to continue caring for their residents on that day.
- We suggest families/responsible parties consider forming a back up plan now just in case a caregiver is considered potentially contagious and must leave.

Protocols to Enter The Towers as of January 11th

We will be adjusting our protocols for entering The Towers. Starting January 11th, all non-resident individuals (e.g. caregivers, team members, visitors) will be required to present a negative COVID test administered within the previous 7 days. This is regardless of vaccination/booster status. I anticipate this practice being in place for the months of January and February—until we know that our area is well past the peak of the Omicron spread.

New Year's Eve Party Canceled

As much as we were looking forward to spending a fun and wonderful New Year's Eve together, we are cancelling the New Year's Eve party. We want to keep everyone as safe as possible and believe this is the safest decision. We look forward to hopefully all being able to celebrate together next year. Let's hope that next year we can all dress up and make fools of ourselves. Remember, what happens at our parties—stays at our parties.

Happy Holidays

To my friends who celebrate Christmas, Merry Christmas! I hope you enjoy spirit of the season while remaining safe. To my friends who honor Kwanzaa, Happy Kwanzaa and also be safe!

To every one of my dear friends at The Towers, I wish each of you a Healthy and Happier 2022.

Staying Strong, Staying Safe and Staying Connected! -- Gus