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Senior Services Rush to Shield Older New Yorkers From Coronavirus

Nursing homes, caregivers help most vulnerable population and their family members prepare



Eileen Nagle, a 79-year-old resident of the Hebrew Home nursing home in Riverdale, the Bronx.
PHOTO: HEBREW HOME AT RIVERDALE

By *Joseph De Avila*

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Nursing homes are restricting visits, senior centers are offering takeaway food, and nonprofit groups are ensuring seniors can stay connected and informed about the spread of [coronavirus](#) in New York City.

[Across the five boroughs](#), the city's nonprofit sector is stepping up efforts to protect the city's most vulnerable population.

The coronavirus outbreak can be especially frightening for older New Yorkers, according to groups that work with seniors. Not only because they are more susceptible to the disease, but many are also homebound, as many dependable social networks like public libraries shut down.

Many groups that work with older residents are adjusting service based on discussions with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and city and state health officials.

The staff of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, a nonprofit that serves about 44,000 patients in the region, is screening patients for coronavirus symptoms on every home visit and phone call, said Andria Castellanos, chief of provider services for the organization. The average age of its patients is 73 and many are homebound.

The organization is also communicating with concerned family members about how they can keep their loved ones safe, she said.

"That's part of trying to reduce the anxiety level with what's going on with our patients," Ms. Castellanos said. She said for the most part patients are remaining calm and are interested in learning and following best practices to avoid contracting the coronavirus.

The Visiting Nurse Service of New York is preparing in case any staff members get sick and is strategizing how it can continue to provide service with a reduced workforce.

"What is our usual business today may look very different four weeks from now," Ms. Castellanos said.



The Hebrew Home no longer gathers residents in one venue for movie nights and instead broadcasts the films into residents' rooms. PHOTO: BYRON SMITH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Other challenges have already emerged for groups that serve seniors in the New York region. The nationwide shortage of personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies is at the top of the list of concerns for nursing homes and medical professionals that care for seniors, according to nonprofit groups that work in this field.

And as for most New Yorkers, it's still unclear who can qualify for testing in the city, said Allison Nickerson, executive director of LiveOn NY, an advocacy group for older New Yorkers. Several senior housing and senior organizations sent people displaying some symptoms to the hospital recently but were denied tests, she said.

Mayor Bill de Blasio on Sunday instructed all Department for the Aging programs to close and cancel all congregate meal, recreational, and educational services and activities. Senior centers will now only offer take-home meals or deliver food to homes.

Take-home food and other services like these will be instrumental in the coming weeks for older New Yorkers, Ms. Nickerson said.

"This is why this system is so important, so you can get meals to people who need it," Ms. Nickerson said. "For a lot of people the senior-service system is their only social network."

Social isolation and keeping seniors informed about the latest coronavirus news are also growing concerns.

"To the extent that we have quarantine-like restrictions on people's movements, isolated seniors are going to be the worse off in trying to manage this crisis and the ones that need the most help," said Tom Kamber, executive director of Older Adults Technology Services, a nonprofit group.



Amid an increase in confirmed cases of the new coronavirus in the U.S., more companies, religious institutions and schools are asking people to stay at home if they may have come into contact with the virus. WSJ follows the case of one man under voluntary self-quarantine. Photo: Sam Dziekan

Mr. Kamber said his organization will soon launch a campaign where they will make thousands of phone calls per week to seniors to make sure they have internet access and to help them set it up if they don't. They will also answer their questions about how to use devices like tablets and walk them through security issues for things like online banking.

Officials at the Hebrew Home nursing home in the Bronx neighborhood of Riverdale recently shut down visitations for its 1,000 residents out of an abundance of caution and per guidance from health officials, said Daniel Reingold, chief executive of RiverSpring Health, a nonprofit that operates the facility. The only exception is for residents that are in hospice care or near the end of their lives, he said.

"We are taking care of the people who are most at risk for the coronavirus," Mr. Reingold. "We cannot take any chances to allow any visitors to come in who are asymptomatic but are carrying the virus."

To further cut down exposure to large crowds, Hebrew Home no longer gathers residents in one venue for movie nights and instead broadcasts the films into the rooms of the residents. The nursing home is also moving activities like music therapy and current-events discussions to each floor of the facility to avoid large congregations of residents.

"I think everyone is a little anxious because we can't do too much, and we are very accustomed to being busy," said 79-year-old Hebrew Home resident Eileen Nagle. "You just hope everyone stays well, and we will be back to our normal days soon."

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