

ARGENTUM WHITE PAPER

THE NEED FOR A “SMART” TESTING STRATEGY

MAY 22, 2020

Senior living operators advocate for the safety and well-being of all residents and staff. To that end, Argentum is asking policy makers to prioritize a testing strategy and approach for senior living residents and staff.

Our residents are among the most vulnerable population in our country. Other than hospitalized individuals, seniors living in communal long-term care settings, including skilled nursing, assisted living, and memory care communities, are especially vulnerable to this virus.

Our industry needs and supports “smart” testing, a testing regime for residents and staff that is reliable, accessible, and executable by all operators. A comprehensive, evidence-based, “smart” testing strategy is needed to address:

- Frequency of testing
- Testing equipment
- Reliability of testing (sensitivity and specificity)
- Comparability between test types and manufacturers
- Turnaround time of testing results
- Less invasive options for reliable specimen collection

Senior living operators and skilled nursing operators need access to reliable testing. Senior living residents are modestly more clinically stable than nursing home residents, but no less in need of reliable testing because of their age and often accompanying co-morbidities, including dementia.

Senior living operators have and will continue to work tirelessly to evaluate, modify, and implement infection prevention and control protocols responsive to the ever changing Covid-19 guidance by CDC, infectious disease experts, public health, and state health departments.

Working to overcome daunting supply chain issues and working with state and local regulators and public health departments, appears in most cases to have resulted in favorable outcomes for our residents and staff. All stakeholders — residents, staff, and family members and loved ones — must understand, however, that there is no assurance that communities can be and will remain free of the virus.

Senior living operators intend to be active participants, partnering with policy makers to develop testing protocols that are reasonable, reliable executable. The industry also seeks to work with public health officials to develop contact tracing protocols to mitigate risk of infection within senior living communities and communities at large.

Since that first case of COVID-19 was reported in the United States, it has touched all our lives and has presented innumerable challenges regarding additional measures to protect our residents, employees, and families from this unknown illness. In response to these challenges, senior living communities across the country have established and implemented new processes and protocols as the pandemic has evolved. These include, but are not limited to:

- instituting restricted access at communities;
- quarantine measures for residents;
- isolation and PPE utilization for presumed and confirmed COVID-19 residents;
- regular symptom screenings and health checks for residents, essential visitors, and staff;
- expanded reporting requirements for COVID-19, as required by local, state, and federal officials;
- enhanced quality improvement systems for re-examination and refinement of infection control processes;
- expanded procurement efforts and cost to obtain needed PPE;
- social distancing practices;
- training employees regarding new processes and procedures;
- universal masking of staff and residents during direct care;
- limiting visitations to medically essential and end of life;
- posting signage and limiting entrances for screening purposes;
- appropriate communication from the community to and with families;
- facilitation of communications between residents and their families and loved ones; and
- in many communities, expanded use of telehealth services.

In response to COVID-19, many senior living communities have also adopted new technology tools and strategies to help keep residents connected, providing new alternatives for continued cognitive and physical engagement. In many instances, communities have also altered physical spaces to provide visible access to residents.

Testing Challenges

It is important to note that there is currently no one testing strategy, and official guidance is widely variable. Variations are substantial and can include:

- Mode of testing (nasal, saliva, blood)
- Molecular vs. antigen vs. antibody testing
- Frequency of testing
- Time of receipt of test results
- Supplies needed for testing
- Costs and affordability of frequent testing
- Physical discomfort of repeated testing
- Reliability of test results and lack of inter-rater reliability among laboratories due to variations in sensitivity and specificity ratings



To date, testing has encountered substantial rates of errors. It is important to note that there are currently no COVID-19 tests on the market that have been fully vetted and approved by FDA. Tests currently in use have received emergency use authorization from FDA, which is granted using less stringent criteria. Overall, this lack of reliability makes it inadvisable to rely too heavily on the results obtained.

It is important to be aware that test results, even if accurate, only provide data at a point in time. This is a significant consideration when deciding when and how to ease restrictions in a senior living community and how to retain and attract a work force willing to care for our seniors under extreme circumstances.

Multiple states have announced mandatory testing initiatives for employees and/or residents in senior living, which moves this from an academic conversation to reality; time is of the essence. Given the numerous issues related to testing shown above, this type of indiscriminate, mandatory testing is inappropriate, and should be based on scientific evidence and consistent guidance.

Further, mandatory testing creates a tremendous financial burden that cannot and should not be borne by residents or operators. At a minimum, costs for these mandates should be reimbursable.

To be clear, the need for testing is fully supported. However, the issues described above are at the heart of our industry's advocacy for developing "smart" testing that is reliable, accessible, and executable.

It is also important to openly acknowledge the need for socialization and the emotional and psychological impact of COVID-19 on our residents and team members, including loneliness, depression, and isolation from loved ones for all stakeholders.

In summary, consensus is needed to determine a testing strategy in senior living to appropriately manage COVID-19. Senior living professionals need a testing solution that is quick, available, convenient, affordable, and reliable, that can be executed at point of entry/care, with timely on-site results.

Argentum and senior living operators it represents want to participate with federal and state policy makers in creating prioritized testing regimes that offer effective solutions for mitigating COVID-19 infection rates in senior living. Having senior living experts participate in policy making decisions is essential to establishing manageable and effective solutions for the industry and our residents.

Disclaimer

The information provided herein has been compiled to assist with decision making on issues related to testing for COVID-19. Argentum, its executive staff and consultants, have attempted to provide the best possible information as a service to the association's membership in a situation that is very quickly evolving and about which so much is unknown. Therefore, Argentum can provide no assurances nor even make any representations about the reliability or accuracy of this information. Each senior living company and each community must make decisions that each regards as in the best interests of the health and safety of residents and staff. Argentum specifically disclaims responsibility or liability for the information it is providing from any legal, regulatory, medical, or compliance point of view.