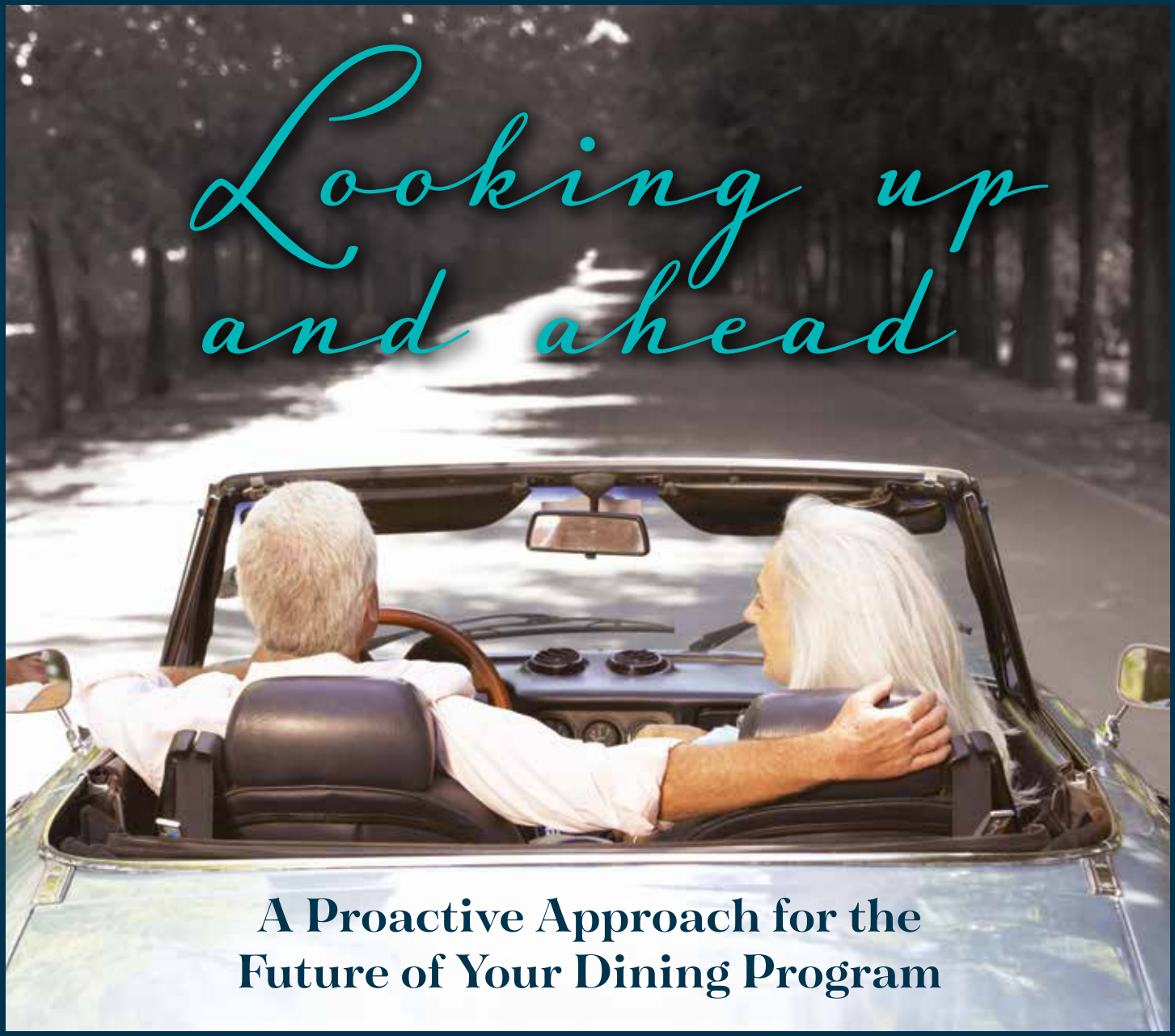

Looking up and ahead

A Proactive Approach for the Future of Your Dining Program

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LIFESTYLES

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The Changing Landscape of Senior Living

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, your critical business issues are also changing.

Rising costs are always a concern, but the risk is greater now when paired with the potentially higher costs related to the coronavirus and the loss of revenue so many communities are currently facing. Further, providing your residents with the highest level of care is always top of mind, but staffing shortages and turnover are creating additional difficulties.

While we understand these issues are not limited to foodservice, we also know improvements to your dining services program can influence your entire operation, including supply chain, hospitality, safety and sanitation. Rather than attempting to tackle these challenges all at once – or waiting to confront them after it is too late – let us share our vision for the future of senior living dining.

Navigating the Future of Senior Living Dining

Over the past two months, the coronavirus lockdown has altered normal dining operations.

We have used that time to reimagine the dining experience and help you navigate the future. While we don't know yet when dining rooms will be able to reopen, nor what the federal or social context will be, we understand the business infrastructure it takes. We have created a proactive approach specifically for senior living communities to best manage their unique situations. This plan has been expertly crafted by Unidine to provide senior executives with clear, measured goals for a seamless reopening of their dining services program, as well as calculated next steps guaranteed to positively impact your entire community.

We also know the first cue to start ramping back up operations will be dictated by the CDC guidelines and conditions in your geography. We identified four goals to prepare for this day:

- **Stabilize the dining operations**
- **Keep residents safe**
- **Support and protect your team members**
- **Encourage residents to dine in your venues**

We understand that no two communities are alike and our team can help you craft a customized plan that is flexible to the needs of your organization and is aligned with your goals.

Key Learnings from Other Countries

Some countries are further ahead of the coronavirus wave. They have made more significant steps toward normalization than other impacted regions. We have researched their approaches and have five key takeaways:

1. Clear and visible signals are needed that convey we are in control of health and safety. This is critical to building customer trust.
2. Supporting teams through reassurance, frequent communications and training – and recognizing them for their flexibility and contributions.
3. We need to be prepared for ongoing variability and the potential start-stop of operations.
4. Leveraging the right technology encourages contactless exchanges with customers.
5. Consumers like to be given the means to protect their safety, therefore, providing the right guidance and tools is reassuring.

Dining Trends to Watch

As we are preparing for a post COVID-19 world, we are anticipating major changes in consumer expectations and behaviors that will impact dining. Here are five trends that we believe will shape operations moving forward:

WELLNESS WILL BECOME EVEN MORE IMPORTANT

There is a growing dialogue around immunity, nutrition, energy and balance.

RESILIENCE IS KEY

It will be imperative to withstand the unexpected, react and bounce back immediately and settle into workable new norms.

FLEXIBILITY

In a world where the threat of lockdowns may stay with us for an extended period, we will need to modify service levels quickly.

REMOTE TOUCHPOINTS CONTINUE

There will remain a need for video conferencing and other technologies to communicate and engage with team members, residents and families.

CARE IS MORE VALUABLE

There have been infinite stories of goodwill, hospitality, concern and reaching out to check on each other more than ever before – impacting operations and service levels.

Reopening Approach

Our plan is driven by the need for social distancing and strict safety and sanitation protocols, with a strong emphasis on balancing business and operational implications. From workforce solutions, to service models and back-of-the-house management, we provide guidance on what leadership should focus on to navigate the new daily operations.

Human Resources

The success of the dining operations relies on our team members. Indeed, if the way we are dining may have changed in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the needs of our seniors have not. Staffing shortage and turnover have been a constant challenge in our industry, but today more than ever, keeping a full and engaged team is paramount. We are sharing some best practices and ideas to adapt your operation and retain talent.

STAFFING MODEL

With a decline in overall demand and census, there is an opportunity to analyze your staffing structure based on the overall dining operation. Venues that will reopen and adjusted service delivery (full service and robust delivery) should drive your organizational model. Solutions from cross-training to flexing hours and shifting scope of operations are ways to stabilize the team, adjust to the situation and not incur additional costs.

If you are looking to hire team members, you can tap into a pool of hospitality professionals who have been laid off in sectors strongly impacted by the coronavirus, such as retail restaurants, hotels, casinos, etc. Sign-on/retention bonus, healthcare benefits and robust training will help in hiring quality staff.

COMMUNICATION

With changes in regulations and the way we operate, being transparent about the situation in your community and the measures adopted to keep residents and team members safe is critical. Educating your team on proper use of personal protective equipment and sanitation protocols will reassure them and demonstrate how we keep them and the community safe.

TEAM MEMBER APPRECIATION

Your dining team has been your behind-the-scenes heroes, leading the department and working countless hours to feed your residents and employees. Support them by providing training, resources and system innovations but also by showing appreciation for their efforts:

- Temporary pay increase or gift cards
- Van service to get to your community and not be dependent on public transportation
- Treats such as a pizza lunch, bagels for breakfast or grab-and-go meals to take home
- Branded products such as water bottles, mugs, etc.

Service Models

From the moment dining venues had to shut down, senior living providers had to quickly find ways to pivot and create at-home restaurant experiences for their residents. From meal kits, delivery, takeout and other grocery services, dining leadership had to adapt to the new requirements and comply with social distancing measures. As states are rolling out plans to reopen the economy, it seems like senior living dining as we know it may be changed forever, providing operators with a tremendous opportunity to innovate and reinvent durable service models. Reimagined venues, adjusted/expanded hours of service, reservations, technology solutions and pickup and delivery options are here to stay. Thoughtful guidance will help providing an exceptional dining experience.

SOCIAL DISTANCING

Dining venues' layout and customer flow will require careful consideration and modification.

- **Spreading out dining rooms** and keeping space between residents while allowing for socialization will call for planning and creativity.
- **Consider communal spaces for additional dining venues** and keep all venues open to ensure social distancing.
- **Utilize eye level and floor signage or stanchions** to remind residents to maintain proper distancing both while waiting to enter dining spaces and enjoying meals.

SERVICE

Beyond the reopening phase, we anticipate that residents will still want access to several dining options: dining in, takeout and delivery. Operators should continue to deliver these services focusing on flexibility, variety and hospitality.

Ensuring a safe and enjoyable dine-in experience will require physical layout adjustment (as described previously) and several operational modifications:

- Extended hours of operations paired with a reservation system allow more residents to dine in.
- Beverage pitchers and fountain dispensers are replaced with single-serve beverages.
- Condiments are now provided with meals rather than left on tables.
- Buffets and salad bars options have changed to full-service plated meals.

Communities will need to implement a takeout/delivery model that is as appealing as the communal dining option, turning convenience into a real hospitality experience. From menu development based on resident preferences and products that can withstand delivery, to branded packaging options, hospitality elements and ordering/delivery process, senior living operators will need to invest in tools and resources to bring the dine-in experience home.

TECHNOLOGY

A technology revolution had started in retirement communities, and the coronavirus locked that in, bringing convenience and social connections to isolated residents. This statement includes dining and should encourage leadership to adopt technology if they haven't already.

- Smartphone and tablet applications make it easy for residents to preorder meals and groceries and provide contact-free payment.
- Reservation systems allow for controlling the flow of residents dining in and provide customized service (special occasions, food preferences, etc.).
- Digital menu displays in dining spaces eliminate the need for printed menus.
- Robots are being used to sanitize facilities, wash dishes and even deliver meals to residents. Embracing technology can be fun, interactive and great way to improve resident safety.

Safety and Sanitation

As dining venues start to reopen, safety and sanitation will continue to be of the utmost importance. We are anticipating new regulatory requirements and decrees from the CDC and state and local governments. Beyond adhering to these guidelines, dining leadership will need to enforce safety and sanitation in order for residents and team members to feel safe. The different service models of the "new" dining operation (dine-in, takeout and delivery) have unique features and bring their own operational and food safety risks. It is paramount to adapt the practices, procedures and workflows of your operation to protect everyone dining in your community. Never before will the health and safety of our residents be so important, as well as scrutinized.

We have developed guidelines and best practices in our operations to ensure a safe environment and recommend the following:

- **Personal protective equipment inventory increased** – At least one week of meal service including masks, gloves and aprons.
- **Social distancing measures** within the food production and dining area – Rearrange the production tables, spread out tables, six-feet rule with coworkers and delivery personnel, avoid unnecessary employee meetings or interactions.
- **Increased hand washing and glove procedures** – Hand washing at least every half hour, gloves changed frequently, limit cash handling and wear gloves, mandate gloves for trash removal and highly touched surface contact.
- **Increased cleaning and disinfecting procedures** – Highly touched surfaces cleaned and sanitized at least hourly, all surface areas to be cleaned, sanitized and disinfected with professional chemical disinfectants, countertop equipment covered while not in use.
- **Frequent audits and checks** by the management team – Daily test and sanitation logs.
- **All communal service stations are closed** and transition to full-service by the dining team.
- **Ongoing training of the team** to reinforce the importance of the safety and sanitation procedures – Hand washing, HACCP procedures, COVID-19 protocols, etc.

Resident Engagement

Seniors who normally would not feel isolated or lonely are now experiencing it. Indeed, the coronavirus outbreak forced communities to close dining rooms and other gathering spaces, leading to social isolation for most residents. With social isolation being associated with higher rates of depression, heart disease and dementia, it is essential to find creative ideas to stay connected. As several states are lifting restrictions and providing guidelines on reopening dining rooms, social distancing will still be enforced in the upcoming months. Therefore, creating meaningful ways to engage our residents through innovative dining and hospitality solutions will help prevent and combat sensations of social isolation and loneliness.

Here are some examples of the programs we have implemented to create unique dining experiences for residents while they remain in their homes. These traveling dining solutions will help you provide variety, convenience and exceptional hospitality to your residents.

CART DELIVERIES

Happy-hour carts, wine and cheese carts, mobile snack carts, ice cream carts and traveling made-to-order stations (omelets, carving station, salads, etc.) are a number of examples of the special experiences you can deliver directly to your residents.

INTERACTIVE MEAL AND SNACK KITS

Provide meal and snack kits for residents to complete in their home as a monotony breaker, with all tools to build an engaging and delicious meal or treat (cookie decorating kit, hot chocolate Mason jar kit, cupcake decorating kit, DIY pizza or taco kit).

GARDEN STARTER KITS

Indoor herb garden starter kit for residents to begin their own herb gardens.

REMOTE THEME DAYS

Menu themes brought together with nicely branded collateral based on the theme: Italian night, Cinco de Mayo, opening day of baseball, Kentucky Derby, brunch, etc. Take it up a notch by adding embellishments to delivery packaging and/or uniforms. For Italian theme night, offer a split of wine, use checkered napkins, a candle and cannoli for dessert.

PERSONAL/SPECIALIZED TRAYS

Cookies or cakes for birthdays, flowers for Mother's Day and handwritten notes signed by the dining team or the family add a unique personal touch to the virtual service experience. These special attentions remind people that we are all in this together.

REMOTE COOKING SHOWS AND DEMONSTRATIONS

Conduct a virtual cooking demonstration with your community's video/production in-house TV network or host via WebEx/Zoom and email a link to your residents to join via their home computers. Seniors watch the dining team in action as they walk through recipes from start to finish, all from the comfort of their home. They can also get the meal kit delivered to their home by the dining team to follow along or cook the delicious recipe after the live demo.

Operations Support

Having a stable back-of-house operation, with the ability to flex to evolving business needs while, maintaining the utmost in health and safety protocols, is an essential part of a successful dining department in our new era. There will be more and more emphasis placed on a fiscally responsible dining department as censuses remain volatile and new move-ins slow or stop.

COST CONTROL

Measures in the past that may have been overlooked, such as food cost control, waste management, streamlined inventories, smart ordering and a competitive supply chain, will take a position of new importance. In some communities, implementing these types of measures can reduce dining costs by double-digit percentages while maintaining high quality. Production management systems, operational tools (HACCP manager, Prep-n-Print, etc.), robust training and comprehensive playbooks will need to be implemented to achieve measurable results.

SUPPLY CHAIN

With economic shutdowns lifting in various stages across different regions of the country, demand for products and commodities such as ground beef, chicken, produce and dairy will ramp up and down as the country reopens. Communities will need support in managing their purchasing and protection from product shortages. Having a supply chain that can directly coordinate with a vast network of partners on the availability of supplies of any kind that you may need will ensure immediate fulfillment of orders.

Monitoring daily the availability, capacity and demands – which continue to evolve day by day – will ensure that you have rapid solutions for any immediate needs.

Areas where a strong supply chain can support your community:

- **PPE sourcing –** Within days of the onset of a crisis, PPE such as masks, gloves, goggles, gowns, thermometers can be secured for your community.
- **To-go meals for labor surges and emergency feeding –** Grab-and-go salads and sandwiches, fully cooked heat-and-serve meals can be available quickly as staffing levels flex up and down. A meal contingency plan is in place for serious labor issues.
- **Product availability –** Faced with challenges such as meat packaging plant closures, surges in retail volumes due to hoarding, foodservice and restaurant demand, and fresh product becoming frozen product, communities need a level of protection to get access to backup products and have access to proprietary inventories secured just for you.

We know these times are tough, but you don't have to fix everything on your own. You need a partner you can trust, someone who can help now when so much seems uncertain and into the future, in a new normal that has yet to be defined.

Let Unidine be that Partner.

For more information, please reach out to:

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