

As others emerge around the state, Umatilla County care facilities fight to prevent a local horror story

By ALEX CASTLE
STAFF WRITER

Two long-term care facilities in Umatilla County were awaiting COVID-19 test results for residents and staff on April 10. Administrators from both confirmed last week that those results were negative and there are currently no active cases in the facilities.

However, both facilities — Cascade Valley Assisted Living and Memory Care in Milton-Freewater and Guardian Angel Homes in Hermiston — remain entrenched in the ongoing fight to keep COVID-19 from spreading among our most vulnerable population.

“I can say we have no pending tests or confirmed cases right now,” said Tyson Frantz, owner of Guardian Angel Homes. “But I can also say that may not be the case tomorrow.”

As of April 14, state officials said 32 of Oregon’s 52 deaths that had been attributed to COVID-19 were connected to long-term care facilities. On April 16, officials confirmed at least 14 deaths at a single Portland nursing home could be attributed to the virus.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services have called long-term care facilities “an accelerator” for the spread of the virus, as evidenced by the tragic stories that have developed around the state and country.

For Frantz and administrators at the other 21 long-term care facilities in Umatilla and Morrow counties monitored by the Department of Human Services, those stories have served as warnings and lessons for how to try and prevent an outbreak, and how to limit its potential carnage.

To detect an outbreak before it becomes a crisis,



A “Heroes Work Here” sign was erected at Guardian Angel Homes in Hermiston earlier this month. The facility has increased staffing levels in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

the Oregon Health Authority has streamlined testing for residents and staff at such facilities within the state. Umatilla County Public Health Director Joe Fiumara said facilities have been provided a document template to fill out and send with any of its pending tests so that the state lab can prioritize running it.

Neither facility provided specifics on the amount of tests run on residents or staff at the facility, but Frantz said his Hermiston facility is relying on criteria from health officials for when to administer a COVID-19 test.

According to Christina Avila, the executive director of Cascade Valley Assisted Living and Memory Care in Milton-Freewater, her staff and residents are being tested if they’re showing even one of the potential symptoms for COVID-19, such as a cough, fever or shortness of breath.

Both administrators said there were no positive cases as of last week, however, Fiumara said the county wouldn’t necessarily announce whether there was a single resident or staff member who tested positive at any of the county’s long-term care facilities.

For now, that information would come from the state, which recently began providing twice-a-week updates on which facilities have confirmed cases and or pending tests, though specific numbers are only provided for facilities with three or more cases or at least one death.

No facilities in Umatilla County have a confirmed case, according to state data released April 14.

Otherwise, Fiumara said the county is merely serving in an advisory role and is waiting to assist any facility that needs it.

“We’re trying to be a resource to them without

getting in their way,” he said.

On the frontlines of prevention, facilities have implemented rigorous sanitation protocols and strict screening policies. At Guardian Angel Homes, that includes screening each of its 64 residents every day and screening each of the 45 staff members before every shift.

“It’s been a burden for sure, but worth the precaution given the risks of this virus,” Frantz said.

While the Department of Human Services has instituted an admission freeze for facilities with active coronavirus cases, Avila said Cascade Valley has mandated a 14-day quarantine for all new residents admitted to the facility.

Frantz said one of his takeaways from reading the “horror stories” of other facilities was the risk of staff transmitting the virus

among themselves and the residents. As a result, Guardian Angel Homes has taken measures to address it, including shutting down the staff break room, requiring all employees clock in from mobile devices, and cohorting staff to particular buildings and wings.

Cascade Valley has also assigned staff to cohorts, Avila said.

Like other essential workers in high-risk areas, facility staff are in need of personal protective equipment for their own safety, which both facilities said they’ve prioritized and have managed to keep in stock, so far.

That equipment will become critical in the event of an outbreak, Frantz said. Guardian Angel Homes recently placed a “significant” order for equipment that was scheduled to arrive by the end of last week. Frantz said they purposefully ordered in excess, so other facilities will have a local supply, if needed.

As for how his Hermiston facility would handle a confirmed outbreak of COVID-19, Frantz said they’ve developed too many contingency plans to enumerate how the facility would respond.

“We have layers of plans depending on the nature of the outbreak,” Frantz said, noting it would depend on which of the facility’s three buildings had the outbreak and which residents or staff tested positive.

Avila said their facility in Milton-Freewater had isolated a hall dedicated to residents who display symptoms of the virus where they can be quarantined.

Amid the preventative measures, the threat of the virus has disrupted daily life at long-term care facilities, and residents’ ability to stay in contact with their families

has been severely limited by statewide restrictions on visitations that were enacted on March 17.

“It’s heartbreaking for us that visitations have to be so restricted,” Frantz said.

Frantz said Guardian Angel Homes has distributed a tablet to each of the facility’s buildings that is dedicated for residents to use for video calls with family members. Avila said Cascade Valley residents have also been relying on technology like Skype and FaceTime to speak with family.

Along with staying connected to those outside the facility, Avila noted staff has worked to develop one-on-one activities for residents to participate in to replace group events or trips into the community that have temporarily ceased.

“Cabin fever is definitely a high concern, but we have a great activities director who has kept the spirits high,” Avila said. “I think it’s been important to find daily activities that are still safe for our residents to participate in.”

Guardian Angel Homes has actually increased its staffing levels in order for residents to have more resources for care and engagement as the residents and staff work together to keep the virus out of the facility.

“I’m absolutely gushing with total praise and gratitude to the staff and people supporting this vulnerable portion of the population right now,” Frantz said. “They deserve every word of gratitude for what they’re doing, while putting themselves at risk, and that’s not just my staff, but every facility in Umatilla County and Eastern Oregon.”

For those wishing to offer support, Avila suggested writing letters to residents.

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