

Responding to COVID-19 starts with a trusted partnership



How Optum helped a large nursing home chain manage the pandemic

When the Saber Healthcare Group, a skilled nursing home chain with facilities across the Southeast and Midwest, began planning its response to the many challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it looked to its trusted partner Optum for collaboration.

Here's an overview of how the two companies collaborated to protect and care for Saber's nursing home residents and health care personnel.

Solid foundation

"We've been working very closely with the entire team at Saber for the past 8 years to deliver care to individuals living in its nursing homes," says Dr. Ronald Shumacher, chief medical officer for Optum Care Services. The foundation of that relationship, notes Shumacher, is "our clinical care model which we provide for institutional special needs plans (I-SNPs)." ISNPs are a type of Medicare Advantage plan for individuals requiring an institutional level of care, such as residents of nursing homes.

The care model is anchored by an onsite advanced practice clinician — typically a nurse practitioner or physician's assistant — who supports nursing home residents enrolled in the UnitedHealthcare Nursing Home Plan.

"We've built a solid foundation with Saber based on a shared vision," says Shumacher. "Saber and Optum adhere to a patient-centered, evidence-based approach that strives to consistently follow patients' goals of care and respects their autonomy."

Managing the pandemic

"The strength of our partnership with Optum helped position us to deal with COVID-19 in our buildings," says Saber's chief medical officer Dr. Nancy Istenes. Adds Shumacher, "when the pandemic hit, we continued doing



Saber Healthcare Group¹

- Skilled nursing facility chain
- Founded in 2001
- More than 100 centers in 7 states
- 10,000 beds
- Average census: 8,500
- Patient rating: 4.18 out of 5

"It's not that we had to build a collaboration with Optum to face COVID-19. It's the strong partnership we already had leading up to the pandemic that allowed us to be so successful together."

– Dr. Nancy Istenes, Chief Medical Officer at Saber

what we had always done in Saber's facilities, but we also had to step up in new ways." That included communicating more frequently with Saber's leadership team and the physicians in their facilities, helping to ensure that patients who tested positive for COVID-19 or who were symptomatic were receiving appropriate care, enabling care to be provided remotely for some patients, and focusing intensely on advanced care planning and goals of care.

"The Optum nurse practitioners are incredibly well trained and skilled in caring for frail, older adults with multiple medical comorbidities," says Istenes. "At the same time, they have built strong relationships with patients and their families, as well as our staff. So, when we began planning for the pandemic, I knew I could very easily rely on that clinical presence in our buildings. The goal for Optum is to keep residents medically stable and treat in place at our facilities. So, we knew we had already maximized the care of those residents prior to the pandemic."

Going above and beyond

Like many nursing home chains in the early stages of COVID-19, Saber faced a significant shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) — masks, gloves, gowns and face shields.

Inspired by her crafting hobby, Saber's chief medical officer Dr. Istenes began a project to encourage Saber employees to make masks at home and donate them to local Saber facilities for use by its facility staff. Dr. Istenes asked Optum to help coordinate delivery of the masks to Saber's various facilities.

What happened next surprised and delighted Dr. Istenes. Optum responded, "We'll not only help coordinate mask delivery, we'll help you make them," she recalls. Optum quickly mobilized. Optum employees across the country began to sew cloth masks, purchase supplies for others to make masks and reached out to community organizations to make masks. All told, Optum provided Saber with more than [1,000] homemade masks.

"The outpouring of support for our skilled nursing facilities was remarkable," says Istenes. "The volume of PPE that Optum got for us was great, but what was even better was the feeling that a friend and partner stepped up alongside us and said, 'we're in this together'".



Facilitating telehealth

When federal restrictions on visitations to nursing facilities began in March 2020, Saber launched a robust telehealth program to ensure that clinicians who had been providing care to residents in its buildings could continue doing so.

“We wanted to make sure that Optum nurse practitioners could get on to our telehealth platform so that if they got sick and couldn’t enter our buildings, they could still connect with patients and their families,” says Istenes.

“Not only did Optum ensure that its clinicians could access the platform, it also piloted our software and devices and gave me valuable feedback on what worked and what didn’t work from the perspective of a provider utilizing it in our building,” she adds.

Navigating end-of-life care

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, Optum introduced the Saber leadership team to its end-of-life-care partner, Compassus, which is the nation’s largest private hospice provider. Compassus has been an especially valuable partner to Saber during the pandemic, according to Istenes. “Compassus helped by providing grief counseling and emotional support for our employees and residents, and providing palliative care that dovetailed with the advanced directive care planning we were doing,” says Istenes.

Sources:

1. 2020 plan year, reporting as of August 2020

Optum/Saber by the numbers¹

- Optum is active in **more than 48** Saber skilled nursing facilities
- Optum supports care for **1,400** Saber residents
- **54** Optum clinicians are on site at those facilities

“Optum nurse practitioners are already engaged with all my provider groups and ask great questions; they really help support my building staff with their clinical expertise.”

– Dr. Nancy Istenes, Chief Medical Officer at Saber

Learn more about how Optum can improve the care in your facility and help you meet your strategic business goals.

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