

Research Brief

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## THE IMPACT OF ASSISTED LIVING ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND PROCESS CHARACTERISTICS ON STAFF ABSENCE DURING COVID-19

**Keywords:** assisted living communities, staffing, staff absence, COVID-19, dementia

**Purpose of the Study:** To better understand the characteristics of assisted living communities in Florida that may be associated with staff absence during COVID-19.

### Key Findings:

- ✓ Memory care services was the only structural characteristic of assisted living communities that was significantly associated with greater challenges with staff absence.
- ✓ Several process characteristics were associated with greater challenges with staff absence, including staff anxiety, challenges with hiring new staff, and sending staff home due to infection or precaution.

**Major Policy/Practice Implication:** The COVID-19 pandemic was a clear example of how important strong leadership and long-term care processes are in emergency situations, as well as a demonstration that emergency policies may have unintended effects on staff and residents.

### IMPORTANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Assisted living communities (ALCs) across the US have dealt with staffing challenges for several years. COVID-19 exacerbated these challenges when staff faced additional strains, such as getting sick, fear of infection, and heightened family responsibilities. Researchers, policy makers, and providers have all worked to better understand the factors that contribute to staff challenges, which become more complex during emergencies. Researchers have identified that outcomes, such as staff absence, can be impacted by both structural and process characteristics, such as provision of memory care services and emergency procedures to limit COVID-19 exposure, respectively. This study assesses the relationships between these ALC characteristics and staff absence.

### STUDY METHODS

Data come from 129 responses to an online survey administered to long-term care administrators as part of a larger study funded by the National Institute on Aging (NIA). Researchers pulled data on organizational characteristics, including facility size, profit status, license type, resident case-mix, and corporate chain membership, as well as data on process characteristics, including staffing challenges with hiring, challenges with staff being sent home due to precaution or infection, consistent staffing, and staff anxiety. They used statistical methods to assess the relationships of organizational and process characteristics with staff absence due to illness, fear of infection, and family responsibilities, while controlling for COVID-19 county positivity rate.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ✓ Of the **organizational characteristics** assessed in the study, only **provision of memory care services** was significantly associated with **staff absense due to fear of infection**. Residents with dementia may have more difficulty understanding, and adhering to, infection prevention protocols, such as social distancing. Staff who work with these residents may have felt that they could not adequately protect themselves from infection.
- ✓ A few **process characteristics** were associated with staff absense.
  - **Staff anxiety** was significantly associated with **staff absense due to illness**. Previous research demonstrates that major staff concerns include causing an outbreak at work or bringing the virus home.
  - **Challenges with hiring new staff** were significantly associated with **staff absense due to family responsibilities**. About 61% of CNAs provide care to family or friends outside of work. Family needs and responsibilities were heightened during COVID-19 when regular support structures (e.g., school) were disrupted.
  - **Challenges with sending staff home due to infection or precaution** were significantly associated with **staff absense due to sickness, fear of infection, and family responsibilities**. One explanation may be that when administrators sent staff home due to precaution, they could have heightened staff anxiety, and/or made staff more comfortable calling out due to precaution.

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*Overall, we found that regardless of the structure of an ALC other than the provision of memory care services, processes of care including challenges with hiring new staff, sending staff home to comply with COVID-19 precautions, staff anxiety, and COVID-19 county positivity rate were significantly associated with greater challenges with staff absence based on the perspectives of ALC administrators.*

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## PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Long-term care staffing challenges are complex issues that require collaborative solutions between stakeholders, especially during emergencies. Policy makers and providers should reference the robust body of research on possible solutions to general staffing issues, including better pay, more empowerment, lighter workloads, and improved training, as well as lessons learned during COVID-19, to minimize byproduct effects of emergency procedures, such as staffing shortages.

Staff could also benefit from programs that minimize job burnout and stress, such as the mindfulness and resiliency program in Florida area hospices. Ideally, these programs provide staff with tools to better navigate emergencies, and space to process disaster-related stress.

Finally, this study demonstrated that leadership likely sets the tone for managing emergencies in their communities. This is a call to ALC administrators to lead with confidence, empathy, and clarity during disasters, as well as consider flexible staffing solutions that may help weather future emergencies.

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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