For Immediate Release

Sundale employees face stigma as well as outpouring of community support

MORGANTOWN, WV (March 28, 2020) — In the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak at Sundale Rehabilitation and Long-Term Care, employees who continue to work have faced stigma from community members as they go about their jobs and daily lives.

For instance, one employee has been refused transportation via rideshares and taxis because of where she works. Another offered cash to purchase gas and the clerk, seeing her employee badge, would not take her money. And when a third employee tried to use a debit card after filling up, the clerk asked her to step away from the counter.

Those stories are just a few examples of what employees have encountered after an already extremely challenging week, said Dr. Carl Shrader, Sundale’s medical director and the residency director of family medicine at the WVU School of Medicine.

And at least one woman who tried to order food on the job said a restaurant refused to deliver to Sundale.

“Other big things of concern are that employers are relieving relatives of the workers from their job duties,” Shrader said. “It’s such a silly request.

One spouse of an employee had disinfectant wipes thrown at him at work. As for another spouse, “They are saying, ‘You can’t return to work until your relative has a negative COVID-19 test,’” Shrader said.

Because there is not a plentiful supply of test kits, it’s not feasible to test everyone who is determined not to be a contact of someone who has the illness.
While fear of getting the highly contagious COVID-19 is understandable, treating people this way is not, say both Dr. Shrader and Dr. Lee B. Smith, Monongalia County Health Department’s executive director and county health officer.

“We know that 25 percent of household contacts get COVID-19, meaning that if you’re in a household where someone has a positive diagnosis, you have a 1 in 4 chance if you are living in the household,” Dr. Smith said.

Of course, that also means there is a 3 in 4 chance that you won’t get it, even being in such close quarters with an individual with the illness.

Also, Dr. Smith noted, “We know that people who wear masks and face or eye protection and gloves can work with infected people and have minimal risk of contracting the illness themselves.”

As of Saturday afternoon, Sundale had 21 residents who tested positive for COVID-19 and eight staff members, Dr. Shrader said. All results are back from tests done at Sundale, he added, so no results are pending.

Fifty-six employees were screened for COVID-19 through Sundale, Dr. Shrader said, leading to the eight positive results. “However, many pursued testing on their own,” he added. “I’m not aware of any positives collected through other avenues but there could be staff with results pending.”

All infected employees are under quarantine and are doing well, said Dr. Shrader.

As to what he wants to say to community members who fear Sundale employees and their families: “I think it goes back to the old, ‘The devil you know vs. the devil you don’t know,’” he said.

That’s because his employees know to exercise proper hand hygiene and social distancing techniques when in public, he said. Also, the fact that 10 of the COVID-19 positive patients have yet to express any symptoms also serves as a reminder that just because a random individual in line with you at the supermarket appears fine, they could have COVID-19 too.

“We are the parrot in the mine shaft,” Dr. Shrader said. “We have 17 people in-house with COVID-19 and 10 have no symptoms. The only reason we knew they were positive is that we were permitted to do the screening. They are otherwise completely normal at this point.”
The average age of Sundale residents is 85, he said, illustrating that while COVID-19 is known to hit older people and those with compromised immune systems harder, the severity of the illness can really be different depending on the individual.

“There doesn’t seem to be a consistent pattern of what this looks like when it presents,” Dr. Shrader added. “There can be a fever or cough or abdominal pain, and then there are people who are positive who don’t have symptoms.”

In spite of the incidents some Sundale employees have experienced in the wake of the outbreak, there also has been a huge outpouring of community support, Dr. Shrader said.

“You should see the amounts of food and non-perishable items people have dropped off,” he added. “We have people reaching out and dropping off supplies.”

Preston Memorial Hospital has offered sterile gowns and N-95 masks and the WVU School of Pharmacy will provide hand sanitizer that they are making.

There also have been offerings of homemade food. Delegate Barbara Evans Fleishauer is one Monongalia County politician who has organized “Cookies for Sundale” in order to provide treats for employees.

“We should be so grateful for the Sundale staffers for continuing to do their job,” she said. “If we want to halt this outbreak, we need to make sure everyone at Sundale has all that they need. We don’t want staff to quit because they are being blamed or stigmatized.”

Dr. Smith also emphasized that just because people have legitimate concerns about the illness, they should not have irrational anxieties.

“People should not be fearful to the point of unrealistic fears of the disease,” he said. “Not wanting to go to work because the spouse of someone works in an environment where there is COVID-19 is not realistic.”

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