

Transcript
Coronavirus Q & A – Episode 47
September 10, 2021



Alex Metricarti: Hi! This is Alex Metricarti, chief marketing and public relations officer for Living Branches. Today is Friday, September 10, and I'm here today with Ed Brubaker, our Living Branches President and CEO, in a bit of a different format than usual.

Ed Brubaker: Yes, our professional photographer was not available today, so we're doing it semi-professionally today through Zoom.

AM: Well, let's start like we always do with a bit of a recap for where we are for Covid right now at Living Branches, and we're back to zero cases. Which is great, because we've had some flare-ups throughout the last month.

EB: Yeah, that's right. I guess I would also say – to clarify “flare-ups” – I think it's been a total of, what? Two cases, or something. So, that's the challenge right now, and I think I spoke to that a little bit as well in the last video. When we get one case, in Personal Care and Health Care, that – depending on what their level of exposure was – can mean that the whole area needs to close down. That's what's really unfortunate, and I wish that it can change at some point. I feel that it will at some point, in the state, or regulatory bodies. But the reality is, if I recall both at The Willows and Oakwood, we did not have anyone, or any additional spread, beyond the one person. So yeah, the challenge is that it can be very localized, very small, as far as the number of persons impacted, but unfortunately then it impacts a lot more people in the facility. That's the challenge, and the reality of this right now. I would reflect, frankly, from my role and where I sit as the CEO, I would observe that the biggest challenge is now isn't so much the physical danger – other than to the few people: staff and residents that are not vaccinated – but I'm not particularly fearful of the serious illness and disease of the vaccinated residents and staff at this point in time. That could change, but right now that's where I'm at. It's more the emotional toll that keeps going on. When you have to close facilities to dining and to activities, that's emotionally challenging. I would say it's emotionally challenging for residents, and for staff...clearly more so for residents, but it is felt for staff, as well. That's for me, the heart-wrenching part of this, because the case count can be very low, but it can still impact a lot of people.

AM: And, I've heard you say more than one time during this pandemic, is that the biggest predictor – if you will – of what happens on our campuses is what happens in the wider. In both Montgomery and Bucks counties, we're back up over 5% positivity.

EB: Yeah, that's right. Fortunately, Montgomery County – which is where two of our campuses are located in – is going up less quickly, or at least in percentages, than Bucks County just week over week. But yes, that's correct: we're now over 5%, and that dictates that we'll have to start weekly testing for unvaccinated staff in Personal Care and Health Care. So, there's implications of that not just from testing, but – as you said – if the case counts continue to go up, we will have cases here. I don't know how else to say it. We try to be really careful; I don't see them as being a huge danger for our residents and staff who are vaccinated, as I said earlier, but it absolutely is reflecting. After all, our staff live and work in the area, and frankly, there's probably more danger...in fact, I even commented the other day, that this is the safest place people will be all week. It's when staff go home or grocery shopping, or out in the community, or when residents do that: go to the grocery store or out in the community, or go to church, or whatever they may be doing, that's when it tends to be more dangerous, from my perspective. Here, we're still making, and here we have the majority of our staff and residents vaccinated. That's kind of the reality, we created a bit of a bubble and so people do go out in those other places, and that's where the more significant challenge becomes.

AM: I do think that it's worth it, maybe, to remind our residents that this is probably the right time to start thinking about, "Do I need to start wearing my face mask again when I'm going to the grocery store? Or going to church?" Things like that.

EB: Yeah, that's right. I'm in the local rotary club, and the recommendation for Rotary International was that if you have in-person meetings, you wear masks. Now, I'm not going to sit here and say that everybody does, but I try to keep mine own for most of the meeting – you can't, obviously, when you're eating – but I make a judgement of when I do and do not go to those meetings. There was a fairly large breakfast meeting the other day that I kind of hung outside the door because I wanted to hear the speaker, but in my role, I wasn't comfortable being amongst a large crowd of persons where I don't know their vaccination status, etc. And that's not a criticism of people that chose to do that – that's not what I'm trying to say – but in my role, I constantly think about: "What is the example that I need to try and be out there?" I'll be the first to say that I am not the perfect example, but I do think about those things and say, "What should I, or should I not be doing?" and "What do I want and wish our staff and residents might do?"

AM: Well, and we've certainly seen breakthrough cases. Persons who are vaccinated, fully-vaccinated, who still were exposed to Covid and developed symptoms. People should be safe.

EB: That's exactly right. I'll just say from my own personal experience, my daughter and her husband actually were married in our side yard, last year in 2020. The first plan was to be at Terrain in Glenn Mills, but that was canceled pretty early on. The invitations and save-the-date had already gone out last year, and then it was going to be in St. Louis: where he grew up. That was canceled because I couldn't travel to Missouri, and then they actually got married in our side yard. Seven of us were there, and his grandparents were there via Zoom. It was a lovely,

lovely wedding. Well, we were going to do the celebration on the 29th of August this year, and unfortunately, she came down with Covid. She and her husband are both vaccinated, and I would say they're very careful. She potentially picked it up work; she works at Whole Foods and is in graduate school in Philly. It was obviously very sad for our family, but we worked through it and we're getting there, but it was a break-through case. Interestingly enough, my sister had a break-through case just last week and I'd say they're generally pretty careful, too. But the positive is: neither of them were in the hospital, and neither of them were in a situation where it was life-threatening, that I'm aware of. Neither one of them. So the vaccine works; it helps tamp down that. But, the reality is that we're all impacted by this disease. Whether it's at work, whether it's in our personal life, and for me, it was just kind of a sobering reminder again that this ain't done. I mean, that's not proper English, but this is not done. Covid is not done with us, and we, collectively as a nation, need to decide: are we done with Covid? I certainly believe that the vaccine is a big, big way that we say that we're done with Covid. And so, we just continue to encourage that very, very strongly.

AM: Well, I think most of our residents would agree that the vaccine is very useful for getting done with Covid because the questions I've been getting this last month from residents are all about, "When am I going to get my booster shot?" and "Is it going to be at Living Branches?" So, let's talk a little bit about that.

EB: Yeah, that's an interesting question, too, and we certainly are doing a lot of reading on that, talking to our pharmacies we utilize, that kind of thing. At the end of the day, we wouldn't have to go through this again, and certainly this round is organized totally and completely differently than it was when CVS and Walgreens were chosen as the distributors. At this point in time, we're feeling that it probably will be best for us to try and coordinate it; it just makes it easier for our staff and for our residents. But we're also going into flu season and flu vaccine time. So, some people would say that you could get them at the same time, and some people aren't comfortable with that. We felt that it's probably going to be best just for the comfort level of everybody involved that we separate those things, and so we're really kind of targeting October as being our flu vaccine month. Our hope is that November can be the Covid booster month. I'd say that the caveat is that, as everything this past year, it's subject to change. My word, if there's anything to learn, we learned that things change, and they change at the last minute sometimes. So that's the current plan: October being the flu vaccine target, and then Covid booster shots in November. But that's all subject to appropriate approvals, and all those kinds of things. That's what we're thinking of now, and it gives us time to plan. Because as you know – and you know firsthand, because you were very involved with the clinics last spring and late winter – it's a lot of logistical work to coordinate all this, it really is. But that's what we're looking at in the present time.

AM: It looks like, at least from what I've been seeing, is if there are residents who are feeling, "I'm eligible to get the booster before then, and I really want to go out and get it," it looks like they'll be able to get it at pharmacies. I think Montgomery County is going to have a couple of clinics, it seems like, and so there are other ways if people don't want to wait.

EB: Exactly, and that's a very good point. They don't have to wait for us; this is our plan, and subject to change, but absolutely. If someone would like to get earlier based on the date they got their first vaccine, that's certainly no problem with us.

AM: Absolutely. And I think most residents aren't even eligible until the middle or end of October, anyway, based on when they originally got their shots. The other thing we should touch on that I have gotten a few questions on is that there's been a lot in the news about vaccine mandates: what does this mean for staff? What could this potentially even mean for residents? What is happening? I think the answer is that nobody actually knows, but maybe we should talk a little bit about what we think is happening.

EB: You said vaccine mandates, correct?

AM: Yes.

EB: I thought that's what you said, yeah, that mandate word that everyone loves so much. Yeah, we have not mandated; we have strongly encouraged, and our goal was to educate, educate, educate, and really encourage very, very strongly. I would say that overall, it really has worked well for us. We're between 90 and 100% for residents, and again it varies by level of care, which campus, that kind of thing. But with staff, I think we're creeping a bit; it has varied from 79 – 80%. Our last information was 81% both partially and fully vaccinated, with the majority being obviously fully vaccinated. And so, we want staff to get comfortable with it. Having said that, a mandate is absolutely coming for Health Care, which is where get CMS or reimbursement for the government, and we will likely look at that in Personal Care as well. Now what we don't know is: What are the requirements of that governmental mandate going to be? We clearly need to comply with that – whatever that mandate looks like, but we have not seen what the final results of that have been. And so, if it allows for certain exemptions whether it be religious or medical, we'll study all that along the way and look at that. I know there are any number of facilities that are mandating 100%, you're fired, and there's very little room for religious or medical exemption. We're choosing not to go that direction, although I respect those who have chosen to do that, but we will need to be mandating as per whatever the government's rules and regulations are, and we plan to do that. In the meantime, we continue to strongly, strongly encourage, and I know there have been recently some staff members who got the vaccine who had chosen not to do it previously, and we continue to work very hard at that and to make that happen. Looking at that, though, I would say that at 81%...facilities I read about are at 35%, maybe 45-50%, so I frankly feel very good about where we're at. Would I love to be better? Absolutely. But our original goal, based on some things coming out of the CDC, etc. was at 75%, and we are now above that. I feel good about where we're at, and we want to continue to work at these things. I know there's a lot of differences of opinions out there on this topic, but that's been our approach and how we plan to move forward.

AM: And I think the information that we got, at least that I heard yesterday, was that whatever the final version – if you will – of the mandate is going to look like, we're going to be told that in October. Is that correct?

EB: Well yeah, that's subject to change. They originally thought, I think, September, but now it looks like October. We'll see what time frame that is and we'll implement it as appropriate. I would also say that the cases that we've had, at The Willows – and I can't remember for Oakwood – they were break-through cases, so the easy thing to do (at least at first) is to assume that it was an unvaccinated person, and that's just not true. We need to watch those kinds of things, too, and make sure we know our facts before we start disseminating information.

AM: Yeah, always. Any final thoughts for us?

EB: I guess maybe my final thought and reflection is this: kudos to our staff, kudos to our residents. This has been a long period of time, and I will speak to myself personally. Well, number one: I'm tired, just like everyone else...I mean, I'll admit it. But the other thing is, in the spring when the vaccines were coming out, is that there was – perhaps a delusion, as we look at it now – is that this would solve our problems. If enough people would get vaccinated, the world would be a different place. I know for myself, we actually were on vacation for the first time for a year and a half in June, and things felt very different. But then things kept getting worse and worse, particularly in the Southern states, and it's kind of disheartening. I know Lori Borglum, who coordinates the testing and the vaccine clinics and things, the other day when I saw her and we were just kind of commiserating, "Oh wow, we need to do testing again." It's just like, "Ugh! When is this going to end?" And so, I am seeing more and more kind of the emotional toll because we were in the thick of it, a year ago or whatever, and you're fighting this common enemy, and it was clear what you need to do. Now, it's frankly just getting old. And so, I just want to say kudos to our staff and to our residents for hanging in there. It has been a long slug fest, and it's not over yet. But honestly, overall the positive attitudes and the care and the love that is shown by our staff, that is shown by residents really is quite heartwarming. Honestly, being in the retirement community business, there is no other place that I'd rather be working, because we really have some great people here: residents and staff. It shows, and it comes out, and people are just good people doing the best they can. So I really appreciate that.

AM: Yeah, that's a good reminder. Because it does feel like it's getting old. But we've said this more than once: there's nobody that we'd rather be doing this with.

EB: That's right.

AM: Well thank you. Thank you to our viewers for sticking through this Zoom edition of our conversation. We'll be back next month hopefully with a professionally produced video. In the meantime, if you have questions, please feel free to send them to coronavirusquestions@livingbranches.org, and we'll be happy to get you an answer. Although, I am out of the office next week, but send them anyway and I'll get back to you when we're back. Have a great week!

EB: Yes, and deserve your well-deserved week off.

AM: Thank you. I shall be far – actually will be in Maine – and in a tent. So hopefully, a very Covid-safe vacation.

EB: Yes, socially distanced! Keep your distance from those bears who may have Covid, I don't know.

AM: I have a whistle and bear spray, so I'm all set. Ha! Have a good week everyone, take care.