

## How COVID-19 has Changed Life for the Elderly in Harris County

COVID-19 has sent shock waves through the nation and the globe. It has forced the world to be put on hold for the time being. This shock and fear are heightened for the elderly and residents of long-term care facilities.

Large cities around the county implemented a shelter-in-place state to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, the state of Texas' shelter-in-place ended on April 30 and was not extended. The state of Texas has begun the slow process of reopening, but many people are wary of the consequences.

Harris County, which houses Houston, is continuing to encourage residents to stay-at-home by requiring people to wear masks and continue social distancing while in public.



Houston Medical Center; Google Images 2020

During this quarantine state, many people are still able to go grocery shopping or see their families. However, residents of long-term care facilities do not have this luxury. Kellie Roe of Belmont Village, a long-term care facility in Houston explained, “residents are encouraged to stay in their rooms at all times.” She also reflected on the difficult decision to halt non-essential visitation but ensured it is the only way to “ensure safety.”

Roe noted the facility realized COVID-19 would affect their business when, “The Houston Rodeo was cancelled in March, and then the following day a professor at Rice University tested positive.” Following these announcements only people necessary to the care of the patients could enter the facility and employees were required to take their temperature before every shift.

Cresa Caso, an Licensed Vocational Nurse at Belmont Village, discussed having to wear a mask and gloves as something, “Never done before, because the people [they] work with aren’t sick they’re just elderly.” Caso noted, “Belmont did a good job in preparing, and even stock-piled food,” which provides a sense of normalcy to the residents during this time. She also discussed the fear and anxiety both the residents and their families are feeling during this time because they are unable to see each other.



Belmont Village, Senior Living Facility in Houston. Google Images 2020.

This fear of the virus and the uncertainty of seeing her loved one led Yolanda Lewis to remove her husband, Tracy Lewis, who has Parkinson's, from Colonial Oaks, his long-term care facility. Yolanda Lewis previously visited her husband twice a day before the pandemic and after seeing him through a window at his facility, she decided to bring him home. However, this means she is completely responsible for his care.

She explained the difficulty, "He can't walk anymore, so I have to lift and move him which I really can't do." She wants to move him back to another facility when "this is all over," but she is unsure what to do in the meantime.

Mrs. Lewis' feelings of uncertainty increased after Colonial Oaks reported a positive COVID-19 resident just days after she moved Mr. Lewis out. Several days after this news, Mr. Lewis woke up struggling to breathe. Yolanda Lewis called 911, but the ambulance workers told her she "was unable to ride in the ambulance or come to the hospital with them," due to COVID-19.

She is now awaiting news about her husband over the phone and, is "still not quite sure what is wrong." She is anxious for the situation to end and to be able to see and help her husband again.

Her feelings are reminiscent of many family members who want to ensure the best care for their loved ones during this time but are fearful of long-term care facilities because of horrific outbreaks in Virginia and Washington.

Caso says they are attempting to ease the anxiety of families at Belmont Village by maintaining contact virtually. "We have iPads that the residents Facetime on, so they can still see their family in a way," she explains.

Hospitals and Emergency Rooms are also trying to ease families concerns by separating parts of the ER and establishing protocols for who comes into the ER.

Nicole Baltazar, a Registered Nurse at Ben Taub Hospital, who works in the ER states Ben Taub “made sure to do an inventory check of PPE (Personal Protection Equipment) early on to ensure the staff in the Covid area is protected.”

She also stated they have enacted “different procedures and policies to make sure patients and staff remain safe.” Baltazar believes this pandemic will improve patient care in the long run because, “feedback is being heard, and teamwork has amped up.”

Despite the uncertainty and confusion, COVID-19 has reminded Baltazar and her coworkers why they decided to be nurses and has brought their “camaraderie and compassion to the next level.”



Elderly woman leaving Memorial Herman after a battle with COVID -19. Google Images 2020

For elderly people who are at home grocery stores and restaurants have implemented special delivery services, so they do not have to leave their homes. HEB and Favor partnered to deliver groceries to people. Favor drivers are scouted by HEB to either fully grocery shop or pick up and deliver groceries to an elderly person’s home.

Target is also ensuring elderly people are not unnecessarily exposed to the virus. “We open the first hour of shopping up for vulnerable people, mainly the elderly,” states George Lawrence, a Target team member.

Both HEB and Target have also put stickers on the ground indicating a six feet space to promote social distancing in the stores.



HEB in Meyerland, Houston. HEB Website 2020

The long-term effects of COVID-19 are unknown, but it is causing people to re-think and focus on health and healthcare. Roe explained the virus will make Belmont more “diligent and alert” because when the pandemic began, Belmont realized their hand sanitizer was not at the proper alcohol percentage to be effective. Belmont will continue to check resident’s temperatures more frequently and ensure their staff is healthy.



Baltazar asserts hospitals will be “better prepared” for dealing with similar situations in the future as they now know what works and what does not.



Houston Skyline. ABC 13 News 2020.

As for Target, post COVID-19 Lawrence believes their improved inventory and return policies will remain.

Residents in long-term care facilities are ready to get back to normal life with the freedom to leave their rooms and see their families. Roe is also looking forward to this day but is unsure of the when it will come to fruition because she states, “we will remain in shelter-in-place long after the city does.”

## Sources

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