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COVID motivated Alzheimer's Orange County to open doors, provide new services

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In 2020 many doors closed, few opened. A notable exception was a short-term residential community providing compassionate care to Orange County seniors with coronavirus.

Licensed for up to 50 beds, the facility was the brainchild of **Alzheimer's Orange County**, the local nonprofit that runs the location.

"We walked into an empty building and within two weeks we had beds, sheets, medical equipment, food, and staff — all the things you need to provide residential care," said **Jim McAleer**, President, and CEO of Alzheimer's Orange County.



Jim McAleer, President and CEO of Alzheimer's Orange County



Meeting the need

Early in the pandemic, healthcare officials recognized that seniors were at higher risk of severe illness from the coronavirus. Acutely ill patients went to the hospital. Seniors with mild COVID symptoms who could care for themselves often remained at home and self-quarantined.

The challenge was to fill the gap for COVID-positive seniors who needed extra care and creating a safe space for them to live while contagious.

Alzheimer's Orange County recognized the need and opened the **Alzheimer's O.C. COVID Care Unit at Fairview Developmental Center**. This residential care facility in Costa Mesa is for seniors who are COVID positive but do not require hospitalization.

Though Alzheimer's Orange County was in the midst of pivoting their traditional programs, like switching from in-person services to "porch visits" and Zoom consults, "we felt like we needed to do more," McAleer explained.

Quick response, free services

Alzheimer's Orange County partnered with the state, which provided the Fairview location, and the county "who stepped up really fast," McAleer said, "We were licensed within 11 days. We had a really tight team who just jumped in and made it happen."

The Fairview location is staffed 24/7 with LVN team leads, caregivers, and RN managers specialty trained to work with seniors who are medically frail or suffer from memory loss or a disability. Services are provided at no cost to the residents.

The facility became a safe haven for those impacted by coronavirus who needed to be isolated from others. "Fairview was a huge risk for us and they didn't hesitate," McAleer said, acknowledging the Alzheimer's Orange County board. Once the board gave their approval, staff and volunteers "literally worked 24/7 to get Fairview to stand up," McAleer said, "It was spectacular to see this crew come together."

"When we are faced with a crisis, when we are faced with a gaping need, we have choices. And one choice is to be part of the solution," McAleer added.



Alzheimer's Orange County healthcare staff at Fairview Development Center celebrate a sweet Valentine's Day.

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**– Jim McAleer, President and CEO,
Alzheimer's Orange County**

More work to be done

Until COVID-19 resolves, Alzheimer's Orange County will continue to support the Fairview location while providing other valued daily services.

"Many [seniors] are living alone," McAleer said, citing the importance of providing frail seniors with access to medications, healthcare, coordinating doctor's trips, and making sure they have adequate food that's healthy.

Alzheimer's, dementia and memory loss impacts the entire family, not just the patient. Alzheimer's Orange County also offers support, training, and counseling services for caregivers. "The caregiver burden is extreme," McAleer said, noting that, "It's not just the person living with dementia. As memory and daily living skills decline, the nature of the disease makes it really tough on the caregivers."

Alzheimer's Orange County provides services to support those living with Alzheimer's, vulnerable seniors, and their caregivers. Many services are free.

Planning for the future

Alzheimer's Orange County plans to return to in-person services in phases when it's safe to do so. COVID-19 taught the organization how to leverage technology to easily reach more people and plans to keep some of their new remote services active, but it's not the same as a handshake or a hug.

"I miss the relationship aspects of everything we do," said McAleer, "Leading a support group, training, sitting next to our board members in a meeting. This business has to be personal."

McAleer worries that the ongoing pandemic may be keeping people in need from reaching out to organizations like Alzheimer's Orange County for services. "The reason we exist is to help seniors in Orange County," McAleer emphasized, "If you need help, give us a call, if your neighbor needs help, give us a call."

"At the end of the day, we can't help until we know you are there," McAleer concluded.

Alzheimer's Orange County by the numbers

- 84,000 living with Alzheimer's in OC
- 34,000 caring for a loved one
- 85,000 masks distributed
- 6,320 calls to the Helpline during the pandemic
- 100% of all funds raised by Alzheimer's O.C. stay in Orange County



If you are or know, a senior in need of memory services, call Alzheimer's Orange County at 844-373-4400 or go to www.alzoc.org.

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www.alzoc.org

