



METHODIST ELDERCARE SERVICES

In the summer of 2013, Wesley Ridge, a retirement community in Reynoldsburg, Ohio, was battling what would eventually become the state's largest Legionnaire's disease outbreak. The conditions led to six deaths and 39 illnesses and afflicted residents, visitors and one employee. The situation was so serious that it could irreparably damage the company's reputation, brand and credibility beyond repair.

Understandably, dealing with a crisis of this magnitude is overwhelming. The outbreak was big news both locally and nationally. Media scrutiny was intense. In addition, residents, their families, employees and the public at large were constantly clamoring for information. The CEO of Methodist ElderCare Services, the company that owns Wesley Ridge, was faced with critical communication decisions on a daily basis. Her every action was scrutinized by the media and the community's stakeholders. Coming up with a plan to communicate effectively with each audience was key to avoid misinformation, unfounded speculation, and ultimately to ensure the organization's future.

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

16 cases of Legionnaire's disease were reported at the Wesley Ridge retirement community within the first 24 hours. Once the outbreak became public, the management team was bombarded with inquiries and interview requests from both local and national media. The situation was serious, and life threatening to the elderly population of Wesley Ridge.

In the initial stages of the outbreak, the CEO did her best to respond to the numerous interview requests. As this was her first experience with crisis management, she felt overwhelmed and apprehensive about how much – or how little – to disclose and expose to public scrutiny. In addition, watching her residents become ill was taking an emotional toll. Since it was likely that media attention would continue until the outbreak was contained and eliminated, Wesley Ridge needed a plan to communicate effectively with its residents and their families, employees, and the media so that the reputation, brand and credibility of the facility would not be damaged beyond repair. Methodist ElderCare Services, the company that owns and operates Wesley Ridge, turned to Team Fleisher Communications, a Columbus-based PR firm, for advice and guidance in managing this very public situation.



TEAM FLEISHER COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Team Fleisher was engaged within 48 hours of the outbreak, and developed a three-prong plan of attack to control the flow of information, eliminate speculation, and address the concerns of key audiences.

- 1. Media:** Ongoing coordination of media activity so that reporters / public are kept up-to-date with accurate information
 - Provided media training for CEO to control the message.
 - Daily emails were sent to reporters so that they had the most up-to-date information on reported cases, deaths, and progress being made to control / eliminate the outbreak.
 - Team Fleisher monitored all media coverage and reached out to news outlets when inaccuracies were reported. Team Fleisher relied on its exceptional working relationships with reporters in Central Ohio and received tremendous cooperation when corrections needed to be made.
- 2. Employees:** Ongoing communications to provide employees with timely and accurate information
 - Armed employees with accurate information on the disease and how it is transmitted.
 - Kept employees fully informed on steps being taken to control and eliminate the bacteria that causes Legionnaire's.
 - Offered guidance on handling inquiries from the media and others outside of the facility.
- 3. Residents and families:** Ongoing communication, education and information to dispel panic
 - An initial email emphasized the quick action being taken by the facility and included a Department of Health fact sheet on Legionnaire's, information on alternate housing for residents of the infected buildings, and reassurance that the residents' safety was the most important consideration.
 - Daily progress reports were sent on the facility's steps to control the bacteria and eliminate it.
 - A public meeting with concerned families and friends of the residents was held; included a report on all the steps that had been taken to control the outbreak, and an extensive question and answer session.
- 4. Health officials:** Ongoing communication with local, state and federal organizations such as The Center for Disease Control to build trust.
 - Team Fleisher opened the lines of communication with all health officials involved in the investigation.
 - Daily phone calls and email communications were made so that health officials would be fully aware of all steps, mandatory and voluntary, Wesley Ridge was taking to prevent further spread of the disease.

RESULTS

While residents and their families were upset about the outbreak, not a single resident moved out of the facility during the time of the crisis. Wesley Ridge believes this was because Team Fleisher encouraged proactive communication thereby keeping its families well informed of all the steps being taken to curb the outbreak and protect the residents and staff. Continuous interaction with health organizations resulted in the formation of "trusted" partnerships, and health officials often commented to the media as to how cooperative and all-encompassing Wesley Ridge's actions had been throughout the crisis. Most importantly, our client believes unequivocally that the crisis communications services Team Fleisher provided were key to surviving the day-to-day pressures of the crisis and ensuring Wesley Ridge would still be thriving post crisis.

Methodist ElderCare Services CEO Margaret Carmany: **"Marcy Fleisher and Team Fleisher provided invaluable services to Methodist ElderCare Services in a time of corporate crisis. Marcy's help was accurate, timely, and made dealing with a frenzied media situation as tolerable as it could possibly be..."**

