

(THIS ONE IS A LITTLE DIFFERENT AS KIM ADDED ALL THE PHOTOS INTO THE ARTICLE)

COVID-19 vaccines bring joy back to Minnesota's senior homes

A dramatic plunge in new coronavirus cases, combined with an aggressive rollout of vaccines, has injected new life into senior communities.



JERRY HOLT, STAR TRIBUNE

Champlain John Syvertson walked the hallway at Oak Meadows with his puppy "Asmund" as he stopped and talked with Rosie Eberhard. Rosie was among the two dozen residents of the Oak Meadows Senior Home that attended Ash Wednesday services Wednesday 18, 2021.



Champlain John Syvertson put ashes on the forehead of Donna Chapp. Donna was among the two dozen residents of the Oak Meadows Senior Home that attended Ash Wednesday services Wednesday 18,2021, in Oakdale, Minn.



Wally Emery, left, who serves meals at Oak Meadows, gave resident Donna Chapp a hug after two dozen residents of the Oak Meadows Senior Home attended Ash Wednesday services Wednesday 18, 2021, in Oakdale, Minn.

On a snowy afternoon in late February, a chorus of jubilant sounds reverberate through the wide corridors of a senior home in Oakdale.

There are echoes of women chanting "Strike, strike, strike!" and "Whoop-whoop!" seconds before they erupt in joyous applause. There are outbursts of men shouting and the clatter of bowling pins falling. But most notable of all is the sound of the laughter rising from dozens of people who, until recently, were isolated and afraid to leave their rooms out of fear of contracting the deadly coronavirus.

The source of the commotion is a spirited round of Wii bowling, a video game that allows players to mimic the action of hurling a ball down a virtual lane. Arms fly in the air as masked residents of the Oak Meadows Senior Living home take turns waving the remote control in the direction of a large television screen.

"You couldn't pry me with a crowbar out of this place," said Chuck Curtis, an 82-year-old retired truck driver, as he throws another virtual spare. "It's too much fun."



Chuck Curtis a COVID-19 survivor and resident of the Oak Meadows Senior Home. He played Wii sport bowling Thursday February 18, 2021, in Oakdale, Minn.



Sylvia Crecelius, a resident of the Oak Meadows Senior Home, attended an event at the home where they played Wii sport bowling



A few months ago, this exuberant scene would have been unthinkable. Like hundreds of other senior homes, Oak Meadows was under a painful lockdown as a dangerous wave of coronavirus infections spread through the state. Residents were largely confined to their rooms and cut off from one another and the outside world. Family members were not allowed inside and had to wave kisses at loved ones from outside their windows. Some residents grew disoriented. Others sank into depression.

But a dramatic plunge in new coronavirus cases, combined with an aggressive rollout of vaccines, has injected new life into Oak Meadows and other senior communities. Group activities such as worship services, art classes, bingo and bridge clubs have returned with more vigor than before the pandemic. Hallways that were eerily silent for much of the past year have suddenly reawakened.

"The lockdown was hard, really hard," said Doris Maloney, 97, who has lived at Oak Meadows for five years. "I hope and I pray that we never ever have to go back to that again."

If trends persist, her wish may come true.

The weekly count of coronavirus infections in Minnesota's 2,100 nursing homes and assisted-living facilities has plummeted 97% in the past three months and has reached its lowest point since early April, when the virus was still relatively new. There were just 97 recorded coronavirus infections among residents and staff in these facilities in the week ending Feb. 20, down from 3,141 infections in the second week of November. Since vaccinations began two months ago, the number of long-term care facilities with active outbreaks has plunged 74% from 802 to 206

State health officials say it's no coincidence that improving trends have coincided with the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines. This month, pharmacists and other specialists finished giving first doses to tens of thousands of residents who live inside these homes. So far, more than 80% of Minnesota's long-term care residents have agreed to receive the shots, which studies have found provide strong protection against the virus. Already, the vaccines have delivered a psychological and emotional boost to the 83,000 Minnesotans who live in senior homes.



Executive director Deborah Veit was photographed at Oak Meadows on Thursday February 25, 2021.

"It's amazing how different we all feel right now," said Deborah Veit, executive director of Oak Meadows, which has gone six weeks without a positive test among its 125 residents. "For so many months, I just felt this constant heaviness and this fear — this daily, daily fear over whether this person will be OK. ... And now that heaviness is lifted and we feel rejuvenated."

Bingo returns

Marcella Erickson, 93, arrived at the bingo game early, needing an extra 15 minutes to lay claim to her preferred table near the back corner of a brightly lit community room. She calls it her "lucky table" because she's won the first round of bingo every time she's sat at the spot since group bingo games returned here a few weeks ago. Arriving early also enables Erickson to get settled, size up the competition and lay out the purple dauber for marking her sheet.

"It's a great excuse to get out of our rooms," she said of the weekly games.

Across the table sat her friend, Rita Gruber, who seemed more interested in bantering with other players and admiring the wildlife outside.

"My gosh," said Gruber, pointing out the window, "it's gotta be squirrel heaven back there amid all those pine trees!"

But once the game began and numbers were called out over the microphone, the players became as quietly attentive as students on exam day.

It did not take long before Erickson got lucky. Faces swiveled in her direction as she yelled out, "Bingo, Bingo!" in a voice muffled by her mask. Moments later, the prize arrived — two \$1 bills, peeled off by an attendant wearing a face shield. For an instant, Erickson was the champion among the two dozen socially distanced players in the room. Then came the next game, with a prize of \$5 for whoever was first to cover their sheet with winning numbers.

"This is just like horseshoes, except that close don't count," Gruber said, chuckling.

The return of bingo has been so popular that, immediately after the last round of numbers is called, players typically rush in their wheelchairs and walkers to the front lobby to sign up for the next week's game before the limited spots are taken. But even with the vaccinations completed, not everything has returned to normal at Oak Meadows.

<https://www.startribune.com/covid-19-vaccines-bring-joy-back-to-minnesota-s-senior-homes/600028265/>



Chaplain John Syvertson held his puppy “Asmund” as Donna Chapp and other residents petted him. Donna was among the two dozen residents of the Oak Meadows Senior Home that attended Ash Wednesday services

A dining room once filled to capacity each evening remains empty as administrators cautiously weigh how to reintroduce group meals safely. Parties and concerts have not resumed. And while residents have begun to gather again in small groups, they are still asked to wear masks and stay several feet apart.

There is also the haunting specter of the virus itself and the realization that this community will never be the same. In November, a COVID-19 outbreak swept through the memory care unit on the facility's third floor. Over a two-week period, 31 residents and staff fell ill from the respiratory illness. Ten residents died.

Veit said she wonders how residents and staff will react when group dining returns. The sight of empty chairs where those who passed away once dined could trigger raw emotions and a repeat of the grieving process that began last year and which, for many here, has never ended.

There might be a 're-mourning' process because they're not realizing that some of the people that they used to sit with are now gone," Veit said.

Small steps forward

Among those who died was Donald Hagen, a former corporate scientist and father of four who succumbed to the respiratory illness in early December.

Hagen shared a room on the memory care unit with his wife of 67 years and former high school sweetheart, Phyllis. The couple spent nearly every waking hour by each other's side — reading books, playing cards and doing word puzzles together. Dog lovers, they volunteered regularly to bring therapy dogs into local hospitals to help alleviate loneliness and stress among patients.

"We were soulmates," Phyllis Hagen said.

Hagen was so distraught over her husband's death that she moved to a new room to avoid constant reminders of his absence. The lockdown at the time only compounded her sorrow by forcing her to mourn alone.

"It was overwhelming," she said, her voice shaking with emotion. "I just couldn't be in a space with Don not being around, and me not seeing anybody or being able to talk to anybody."



Dr. Jerry Zhou, a licensed Hearing Aid Specialist, helped Phyllis Hagen, a resident at Oak Meadows Senior Home, with her new hearing aids Thursday February 25, 2021, in Oakdale, Minn. The portrait in the background is Phyllis husband Donald Hagen. They were married 67 years and he passed away from COVID-19 complications in December of 2020.

Yet like many residents here, Hagen is taking small steps toward healing by rekindling social relationships.

For a long time, she had been reluctant to participate in group activities because of declining hearing, embarrassed that she couldn't follow conversations. But last week, Hagen and her daughter, Kathleen, resolved the problem by having a visiting ear specialist teach her how to use hearing aids. Suddenly overjoyed that she could hear voices without strain, Hagen ventured out of her room to join a small circle of women who chat each afternoon in the building's spacious lobby.

Hagen took the elevator to the first floor, walked straight toward four women sitting in plush chairs, and announced that she wanted to join their conversation. As she pulled on her face mask, Hagen politely asked them what they talked about during their gatherings. The women glanced at one another for several minutes, not sure of how to answer, until Doris Maloney finally broke the silence.

"You know, sometimes we just sit and we don't talk," Maloney explained. "Sometimes, just seeing each other is enough to feel alive."

Chris Serres covers social services for the Star Tribune.

chrisserres@startribune.com 612-673-4308

Twitter: @chrisserres

Photographer: Jerry Holt. Jerry.holt@startribune.com

