

# Case Study: How Friendship Senior Options Leveraged Digital Crisis Communications with Caremerge to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19



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## Categories:

- ◆ Crisis Communications
- ◆ Functional/Health Outcomes
- ◆ Staff Efficiencies

### About the Organization

#### Organization Name:

Friendship Senior Options

#### Main Contributor:

Steve Yenchek, CEO

**Organization Type:** Continuing Care Retirement Communities

#### Organization Description:

Friendship Senior Options (FSO) operates two Chicagoland continuing care retirement communities, Friendship Village of Schaumburg and Greenfields of Geneva. For over 40 years, FSO has been an innovator in senior living, and today it empowers more than 1,000 residents to live independently with comprehensive health care, amenities, enrichment, and volunteering opportunities.

## Project Description

In mid-March, the coronavirus pandemic became widely understood as a serious public health threat to vulnerable populations like older adults. FSO acted fast to protect its communities and prevent the spread of disease.

To do that, FSO leveraged its existing crisis communication strategy and employed Caremerge, a provider of EHR and resident engagement technology for senior living. FSO leaders executed a robust communication plan that delivered daily updates through Caremerge to support the community's COVID-19 screening and response efforts. This ultimately helped them prevent an outbreak within their communities.

## System Type

Digital community engagement platform (calendar synching, community programming information), digital family engagement platform.

## Describe System Embodiment

The Caremerge platform, including its community and family engagement portals, is accessible to all FSO staff and residents via smartphone, tablet, or computer.

## Business Model

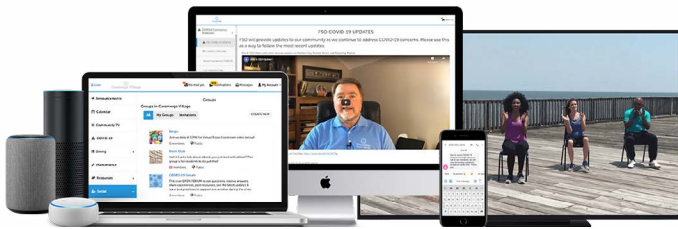
Caremerge's technologies are offered to communities through a Software as a Service (SaaS) model, and pricing varies per solutions package.

## Implementation Approach

Caremerge's platform operates at over 450 senior living communities across the country. The provider sends an experienced client success team to each site for a system launch to ensure a smooth rollout.

FSO adopted Caremerge prior to the pandemic, and the community had been using Caremerge's Community Engagement platform, Family Engagement platform, Caremerge Voice (Alexa technology), and Digital Calendar.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, FSO leaders needed to expand their existing crisis communications and disease management plans. Leadership quickly put together a 60-person task force for COVID-19, led by the director of risk management.



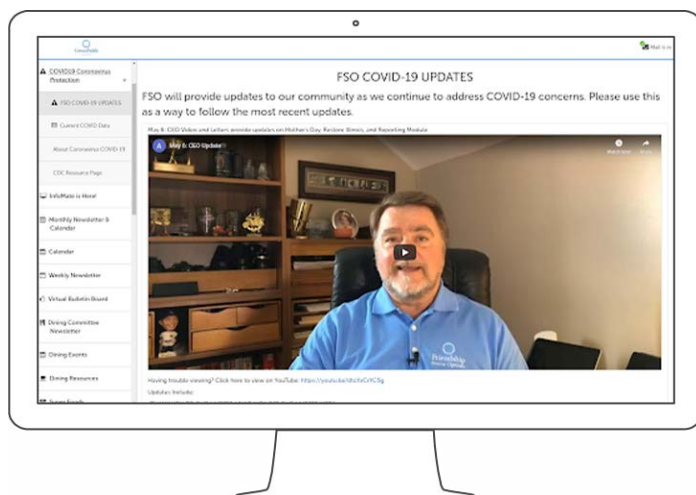
This group included corporate and community staff representatives who convened 3 times each week. They identified 2 goals to guide FSO's crisis communications plan:

- 1. Inform all community members of prevention protocols and operational changes.** To prevent the spread of COVID-19 from staff to residents and uphold community-wide protection measures, FSO needed all community members to understand and comply with safety best practices.
- 2. Give transparent, timely, and accurate COVID-19 updates to all residents, staff, and family members.** Those updates had to meet government regulations and provide essential information, but FSO leaders also wanted to give its communities reassurance and peace of mind amid such a turbulent time.

FSO leaders recognized that they could accomplish both goals through redundant community messaging via email, apps, and print to reach all audiences. With the Caremerge platform already in place, they knew they could easily adapt the system's functionalities to FSO's crisis communications plan.

## Advantages to the Approach

In addition to FSO's own internal channels, Caremerge allowed FSO leaders to efficiently distribute daily updates and broadcast videos personally recorded by CEO Steve Yenchek to the whole community.



There are three central benefits of the Caremerge platform that helped FSO execute their communication strategy. The platform is:

- 1. Scalable.** The Caremerge platform was designed for large-scale communication within a community. FSO was able to quickly deliver hundreds of tailored updates to various audiences, from residents to staff to family members.
- 2. Easy to use.** FSO leaders were already familiar with the platform, and the system's straightforward interface enabled them to easily create custom pages, plan COVID-19 messaging, and send recorded videos.
- 3. Compliant.** Caremerge supports FSO's compliance with government regulatory standards.

*"Having Caremerge in place was really valuable to us in getting out that message, and boosted our communication plan's efficiency, efficacy, and compliance,"*

*Steve Yenchek, CEO of Friendship Senior Options*

## Outcomes

The efficiency, efficacy, and compliance of the Caremerge platform drove the success of FSO's crisis communication plan. FSO leaders knew that the plan was working when both communities' COVID-19 containment efforts were well under control several weeks into its execution.

Staff and residents complied with the communities' screening questionnaires, and those who tested positive for COVID-19, along with any people in contact with them, swiftly self-quarantined. As the communities identified positive cases following screening, they were able to administer fewer tests. This process enabled staff and residents who tested positive to isolate while home or receiving treatment, and safely return to work and residence, respectively, upon recovering.

Residents also quickly followed the stay-at-home order and respected internal community guidelines communicated over the Caremerge platform's different channels. Even better, they appreciate the measures that were put in place: many residents spoke highly of how FSO managed the COVID-19 crisis and communicated with its stakeholders.

## Challenges and Pitfalls to Avoid

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a seismic event in the senior living industry. National headlines drew attention to the tragedies occurring in residences around the country, which only elevated concern for everyone who lives, works, or has a family member in a senior living community.

FSO understood at the outset of the pandemic that the safety and holistic well-being of their community members was at stake, as disease prevention precautions like quarantine can give rise to loneliness and community detachment.

The FSO crisis communication strategy was primarily designed to protect its communities' safety, but they didn't stop there. By sending daily updates and videos recorded by Yenchek himself, FSO sought to enrich its sense of community when it mattered most.

As communities begin to reopen in the ongoing pandemic, FSO plans to continue to leverage its own communication channels and Caremerge to ensure the safety and well-being of all community members into the future.

## **Lessons Learned/Advice to Share with Others**

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The key to successful crisis communications is to have the plans and tools in place before a crisis comes. FSO leaders had both in Caremerge: a disease management plan and an agile technology system.

For this reason, it's crucial for senior living communities to consider a technology vendor wisely. Scalability, ease of use, and compliance are important, but the system's versatility is perhaps its most important quality.

With Caremerge, FSO leadership can seamlessly transition from using the platform as a social hub to an informational source that helps to keep its communities safe and connected.