



# Bridging the Loneliness Gap

**Exploring Perceptions of Socialization, Engagement, and Satisfaction Among Key Senior Living Stakeholders**

## Introduction

Loneliness has always been a major issue for seniors. Nowhere has this been more of a challenge than in senior living communities, a setting where many didn't fully realize the extent of the issue until the ongoing pandemic highlighted the problem. A 2020 Edward Jones report shows that 47% of retirees worry about becoming more isolated as they get older, and 1 in 4 adults over the age of 65 is socially isolated with too little contact and interaction with others.<sup>1</sup> Before the pandemic, senior living communities could offer a variety of in-person programming and group activities to mitigate the issue, though not all of these solutions were effective in building the kind of social connection that truly overcomes loneliness. A 2019 report from the American Seniors Housing Association (ASHA) showed that even before the pandemic, only 1 in 5 residents said they had a friend within their senior living community.<sup>2</sup>

The need for precautionary isolation has made this problem worse, as communities have been forced to eliminate group activities and in-person visits to protect residents' health. Beyond cutting critical social connections, this increased isolation presents its own health concerns, including higher risks of:<sup>3</sup>

- Dementia (64% increase)
- Stroke (32% increase)
- Coronary artery disease (29% increase)

More than ever, communities are grappling with the realities of resident loneliness and struggling to create meaningful social connections for residents—not only to manage times when in-person options are limited, but also to fully address the ongoing and pervasive issue in the long term.

Unfortunately, that's not the only challenge senior living operators are facing. With more family members keeping their seniors at home, competition among communities has increased, and the need for communities to appeal to a smaller pool of move-ins has never been greater. In addition to demonstrating how they keep residents healthy and engaged, communities will have to show that they can help residents stay connected to their families, foster a sense of belonging, and facilitate friendships among residents. While pandemic conditions have made this issue more pressing, communities must prove they can do these things at all times, whether in response to the seasonal flu that often necessitates restricted visitation,

or during a regular week when family and friends simply may not be able to visit in person.

To study the prevalence of loneliness and the extent to which residents feel socially connected within senior living communities, iN2L surveyed three stakeholder groups on their experiences and perspectives before and during the pandemic.

## Methodology

In June 2020, iN2L collaborated with research partners to survey three groups: 100 senior living community leaders, 150 residents of senior living communities, and 500 family members who are the main decision-makers for seniors residing in communities. All three groups represented assisted living and continuing care retirement communities (CCRC).



### Residents

About half of respondents reported living in a CCRC, while the remainder live in assisted living communities. Three-quarters have lived in their current community for at least a year.



### Family Members

Almost two-thirds of respondents reported they are the sole decision-maker for their family member's care. More than half said they have a parent or in-law currently residing in a senior living community; others cited a spouse, grandparent, or other family member.



### Operators

Almost two-thirds of respondents identified as senior living CEOs/operators. Respondents also included clinical and therapy, marketing and business development, and activity leads.

**“Two-thirds of operators say they're struggling to create personalized engagement activities. If they start addressing this challenge now, they'll be better positioned to provide the community experience residents and their families will expect after the pandemic.”**

**– Jack York, President and Co-Founder, iN2L**

## Key Takeaways



Residents are lonely—and have been even before the pandemic. Half have never felt like they ever had any friends in their community; reports of loneliness have tripled during the pandemic.



Family members feel there is opportunity for improvement when it comes to how communities get to know residents and how they use that information to personalize care and engagement.



Communities were much less aware of pervasive resident loneliness before the pandemic. Now, they're finding it more difficult to create tailored engagement experiences for residents.

## The Pandemic Has Disrupted How Communities Engage Residents

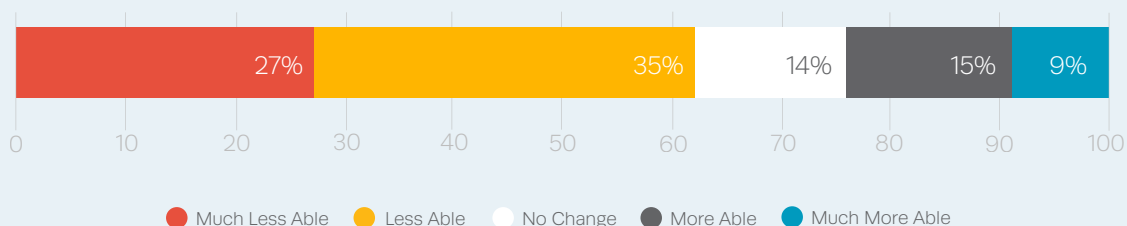
The precautionary isolation that has had to be enforced during the pandemic has upended normal operations within senior living communities. Not surprisingly, more than a quarter (28%) of residents report getting fewer onsite events and activities, and 29% said their communities have stopped these altogether.

Community leaders corroborate this struggle. Almost two-thirds (62%) say they are less able to create tailored engagement activities for residents compared to pre-pandemic times. Yet, 79% of leaders said characterizing their community as a lifestyle product is a high or top priority.

This dichotomy carries significant financial implications for communities, as the lifestyle experience is also important to family members. In fact, the second most cited reason a family member would not recommend a community is if the resident was not provided with opportunities for engagement and activities that fit their personal interests. Communities will require solutions to bridge this gap and allow them to continue to demonstrate how they deliver on these criteria if they are to prevail in the quest for occupancy. Many are already turning to engagement technology to help them do so.

## The Pandemic Has Changed Communities' Ability to Create Individually Tailored Engagement Activities

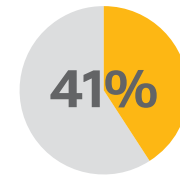
62% report lower levels of ability to create tailored engagement activities.



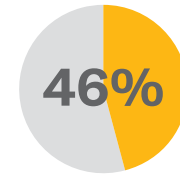
Despite the decrease in certain types of experiences during the pandemic, residents report that their access to video calls (46%) and technology owned by the community (41%) has increased. While video calls were not a mainstay before the pandemic, they have clearly become part of the social connection solution for many communities. Even so, there's a long way to go before residents have access to on-demand video chat as a standard, ongoing offering across the industry.

Still, more is needed; a key component of providing a lifestyle based on engagement and connection will require communities to think beyond video chat. What are other convenient, technology-enabled ways for family and friends to interact with residents? How will communities empower residents to connect with people and experiences that matter to them?

## Resident Access to Technology Services Has Increased During the Pandemic



Increased Access to Technology Devices Owned by the Community



Increased Access to Video Calls With Loved Ones

Findings from iN2L's recent report, *Senior Living 2020: The State of Engagement and Technology*, show a **60% increase in the number of leaders who believe engagement technology is extremely important now**, versus before the pandemic, and a **100% increase in the number of leaders who say there is definitely a return on investment for engagement technology.**<sup>4</sup>



60%

Engagement Technology Is Extremely Important



100%

Definitely an ROI for Engagement Technology



## Communities Provide Opportunities for Socialization, but Satisfaction During COVID-19 Is Lower

Before COVID-19, about two-thirds of residents were satisfied with opportunities to socialize with family and friends inside (62%) or outside (68%) the community, or to participate in fun events inside (64%) or outside (68%) the community. Interestingly, the survey results show that families were more satisfied with these opportunities overall, with satisfaction numbers up to 50% higher than those of residents. Though it's promising to see family satisfaction so high, the disconnect between family and resident satisfaction may indicate that families possess a false impression that residents are able to take advantage of opportunities for socialization and connection with activities that simply check a box.

Resident and family satisfaction levels for opportunities to socialize dropped to within six points of each other during the pandemic. While the same number of residents are satisfied with opportunities to socialize with family and friends inside the community, fewer are satisfied with opportunities outside (-16%) the community. Family satisfaction dropped significantly for opportunities inside (-24%) and outside (-25%). These are clear areas of opportunity for communities to raise satisfaction for residents as well as families—in many cases the decision-makers—to prevent attrition.

Meanwhile, resident and family satisfaction with opportunities for fun events also decreased. Interestingly, family satisfaction remained significantly higher than residents' for opportunities inside the community, yet fell lower for opportunities outside the community.

It's worth noting that while overall satisfaction levels fell during the pandemic, resident satisfaction was also not that high to begin with, including a significant portion who felt neutral. This presents the potential to move almost a third of residents from neutral to satisfied about opportunities to socialize inside the community. A lack of quality opportunities for socialization is an ongoing issue, albeit one that COVID-19 has highlighted. In a tight and increasingly competitive market, it will be critical for senior living communities to solve for meaningful socialization in order to attract new residents and maintain occupancy.



A SageAge survey from June 2020 found that when asked about the most challenging aspects of COVID-19,

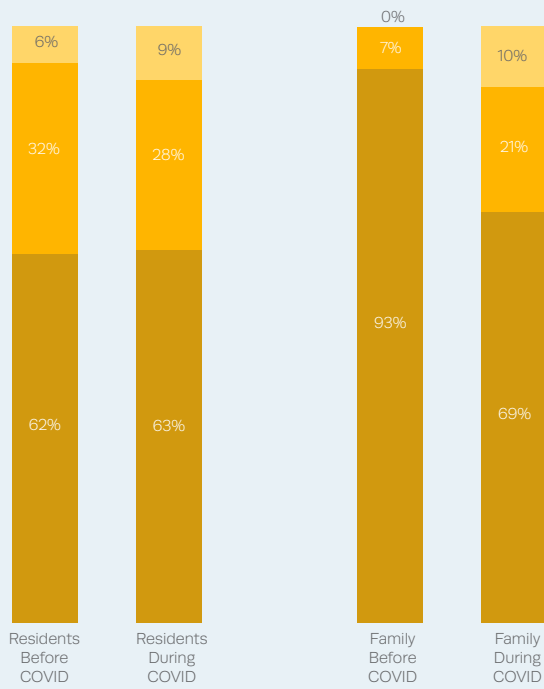
**30% of residents cited the lack of social interaction, while 11% noted boredom and a lack of things to do.<sup>5</sup>**

This should raise a red flag for communities, since, when asked about the biggest benefits of senior living communities, the majority of respondents cited socialization.



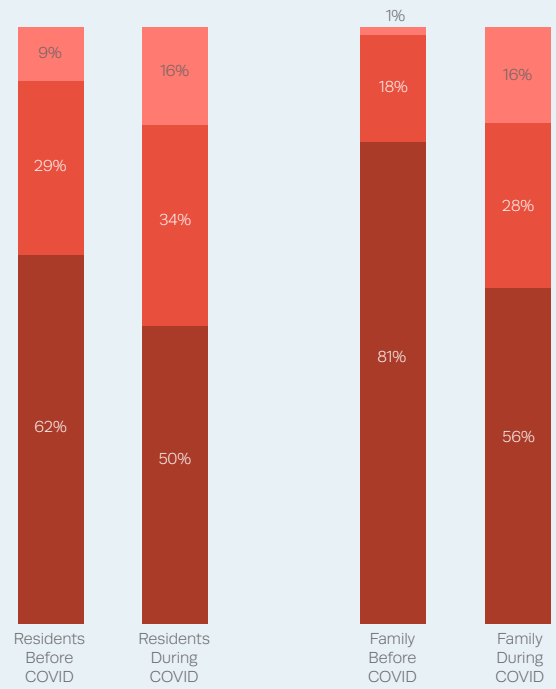
# Resident and Family Satisfaction With Opportunities to Socialize Has Decreased

## Satisfaction With Opportunities to Socialize Inside the Community



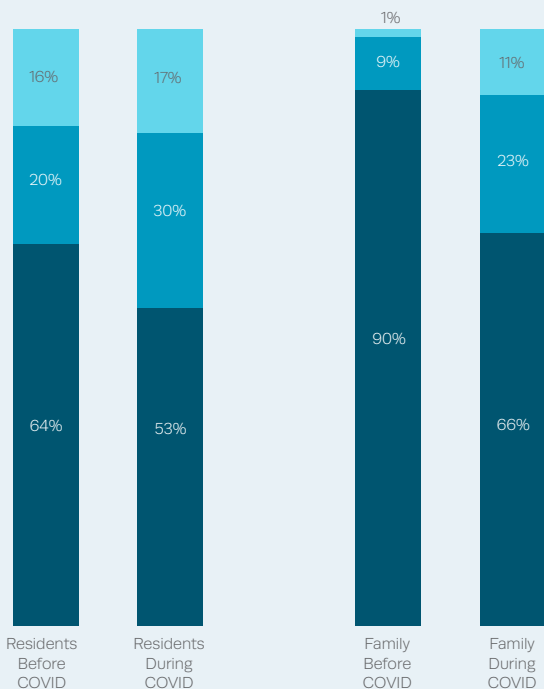
● Satisfied ● Neutral ● Dissatisfied

## Satisfaction With Opportunities to Socialize Outside the Community



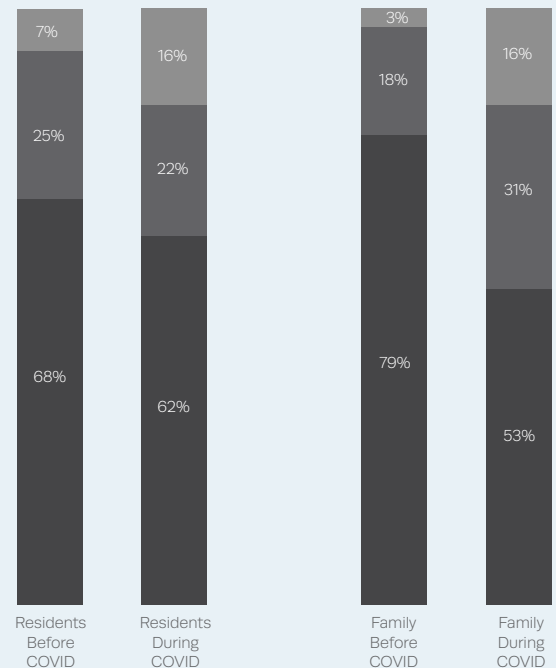
● Satisfied ● Neutral ● Dissatisfied

## Satisfaction With Opportunities for Fun Events Inside the Community



● Satisfied ● Neutral ● Dissatisfied

## Satisfaction With Opportunities for Fun Events Outside the Community



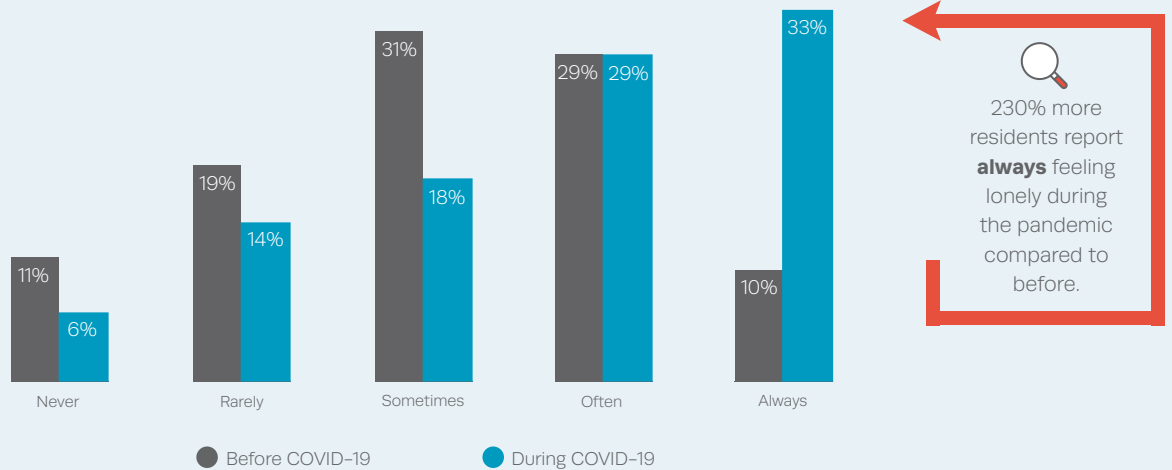
● Satisfied ● Neutral ● Dissatisfied

## Older Adults Were Lonely Even Before COVID-19

Even before COVID-19, residents report being lonelier than operators think, with 39% reporting they often or always felt lonely versus only 1% of operators who believed this to be the case. Family members' observations are more in line with residents, as 26% report their senior often or always felt lonely before the pandemic.

During the pandemic, this balance shifts, with 74% of senior living operators reporting their residents often or always feel lonely, compared to 58% of family members and 62% of residents. While resident social isolation and loneliness are not new challenges in senior living, the data is indicative of how COVID-19 has dramatically increased awareness of and concern for these issues.

### Resident Loneliness Before and During the Pandemic



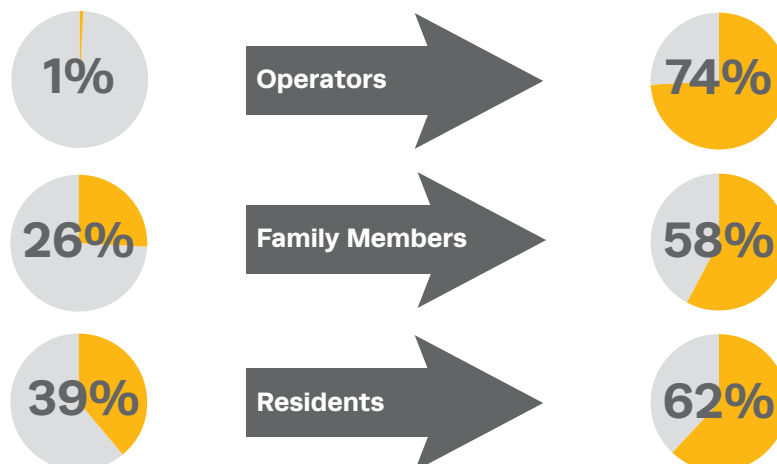
The survey data also reveals a significant increase in residents who report feeling lonely during the pandemic; 59% more residents said they sometimes or often feel lonely now compared to how they felt before. Most alarming is the 230% spike in residents who report always feeling lonely during the pandemic compared to before COVID-19.

“Leaders may think they have a method of collecting resident information, but can staff get to it? Having it is very different from using it. A digital profile is essential to ensure information on residents' interests can be accessed by any staff member who needs it.”  
 – Karen O'Hern, VP Product Management, iN2L

### Perceptions of Resident Loneliness *Before* COVID-19

vs.

### Perceptions of Resident Loneliness *During* COVID-19



## Loneliness May Be Attributed to Difficulty Making Friends

Quality of relationships within communities appears to be a major factor in how satisfied residents are with opportunities to socialize. Half of residents say they have never felt like they had any friends in their community. This is also a situation that existed before the pandemic, as a 2019 study conducted by ASHA and ProMatura reported that less than 20% of residents were satisfied with the number of friends they had in their community.<sup>2</sup> Family members agree—one-third (33%) say their senior has never had friends in their community to share common interests with, and 38% of family members say their senior used to be, but is no longer, close with anyone in the community.

The top reason family members would not recommend a community is if the community neglected to provide opportunities for residents to socialize with each other. The second most cited reason for a family member to not recommend a community is if the community did not provide opportunities for engagement and activities that interested the resident. These findings are significant given the 62% of community leaders who said they are currently less able to create tailored engagement activities for residents compared to before the pandemic.



An ASHA study published in April 2019 showed the primary reason for residents not feeling at home in a community is loneliness. Many residents who were interviewed said that it was hard to make friends because they could not find people in their community with similar interests or abilities. **Less than 20%** of residents and families surveyed as part of that study **felt a strong sense of camaraderie within the community, yet 50% of their reported willingness to recommend a community is impacted by camaraderie.**<sup>2</sup>

### Top 3 Reasons Family Members Would Not Recommend a Community

No opportunities for my loved one to socialize with other residents



No opportunities for engagement activities that interest my loved one



No opportunities for my loved one to socialize with family or friends living outside the community



Family decision-makers say the number one reason not to recommend a community is if opportunities for residents to socialize with each other were lacking—yet 2 in 5 community leaders say it's of average or little importance to give residents the ability to digitally connect with one another.






Operators agree on the importance of friendship: 99% say that having friends impacts a resident's well-being, and 98% agree that having friends inside the community impacts a resident's family's satisfaction with the community. Despite this, only 41% of communities say that using engagement technology to facilitate interaction among residents is absolutely essential during the pandemic. An almost equal number (43%) assert that using engagement technology to give residents the ability to digitally connect with one another is of average or little importance.

Why the disconnect? It could be that leaders have no firsthand knowledge of or experience seeing how engagement technology can be used for this purpose. Communities that recognize how digital connection among residents facilitates critical friendships will clearly have a competitive edge to impact resident and family satisfaction, as well as families' willingness to recommend their community.



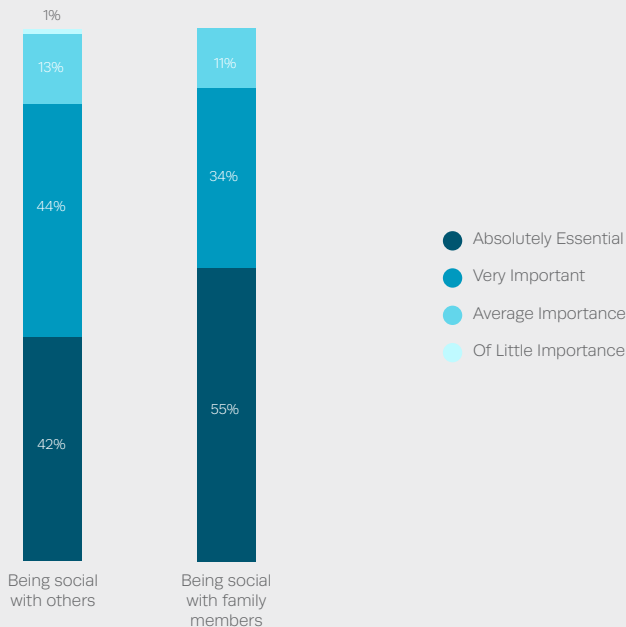
 99% of operators say that having friends impacts a resident's well-being.

## Residents—and Family Decision-Makers—Agree That Personalized Activities and Socialization Are Essential

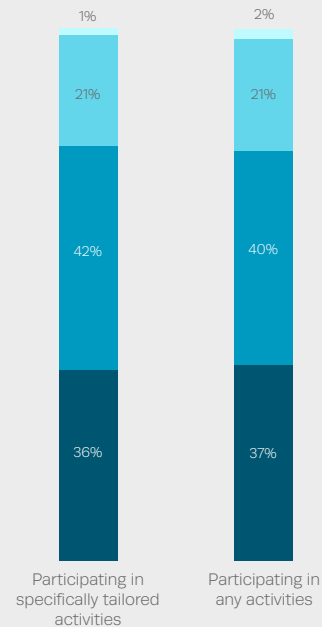
Two-thirds (66%) of residents view being social as absolutely essential or very important to their overall well-being. Almost three-quarters (73%) view participating in activities specifically tailored to them as an individual as absolutely essential or very important

to their well-being. Family members feel even more strongly about this topic—86% believe being social and 78% believe tailored activities are absolutely essential or very important to their senior's well-being.

### Family Members' Perception of the Importance of Socialization



### Family Members' Perception of the Importance of Activities Specifically Tailored to the Resident



It's clear that both social connection and personalized engagement are critical to the resident experience and family members' perception of that experience, which ultimately drives their selection of senior living options. Senior living communities will need to be able to demonstrate excellence in both areas if they are to remain competitive—and community leaders seem to agree. The majority (92%) say that when it comes to resident recruitment, it is extremely or very important to demonstrate that they are using residents' backgrounds

and interests to personalize care. However, the reality may be different from what senior living community leaders are striving for.



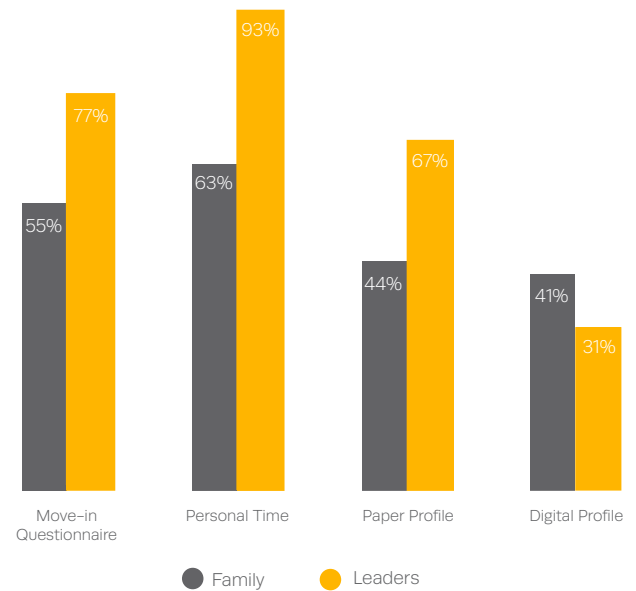
Senior living communities will need to be able to demonstrate excellence in personalized engagement and social connection if they are to remain competitive.

## Communities Could Do a Better Job of Gathering and Using Resident Information to Personalize Experiences

More than a third of family members say their senior's community did not get to know the resident through personal time (37%) or by asking a family member (35%). Almost half of family members said they didn't get a move-in questionnaire (45%) or that the community has not used ongoing conversations with the family member or resident to get to know them (46%). However, their responses differ from what community leaders report. Only 23% of leaders say they don't do a move-in questionnaire, and only 7% say they don't use personal time to get to know individual residents. Gathering resident information is critical to setting up a successful experience within a community, so it's concerning to see that a significant number of communities are falling short in getting to know residents in the most basic ways. Communities clearly believe they are doing more than family decision-makers perceive, presenting an opportunity to be more intentional and transparent about these foundational onboarding activities.

Overall, only 42% of family members are very satisfied with staff knowledge of their senior, and only 24% give top marks to the community's use of this information to tailor and assist in picking activities and creating individualized care for their senior (rated as excellent on a five-point scale). This data should be concerning for communities that will need higher ratings from these decision-makers in order to maintain occupancy. With the prevalence of staff turnover, senior living communities must take the information gathered on residents' interests and build it into institutional knowledge, making it easily accessible to all staff. As the responsibility for resident engagement begins to

### How Communities Get to Know New Residents

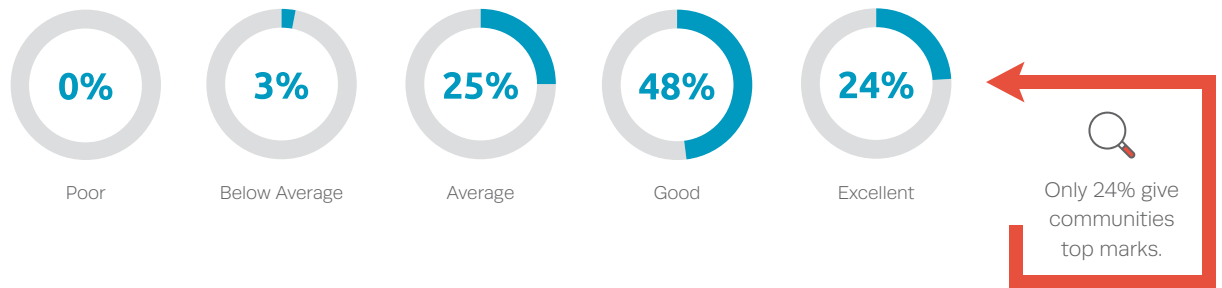


shift from being the primary responsibility of activity professionals to a shared responsibility of the entire staff, senior living communities must ensure that all team members can intuitively access and leverage knowledge on every resident to ensure continuity of a high-quality resident experience.



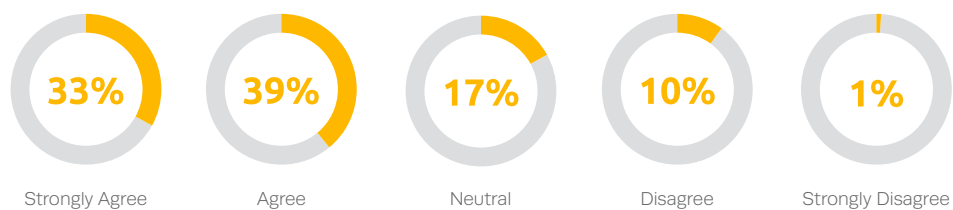
Only 42% of family decision-makers are very satisfied with staff knowledge of their senior. To close this gap, communities must build resident information into institutional knowledge and make it easily accessible to all staff.

## Family Members Assess How Well Communities Use Collected Information to Tailor the Resident Experience



Most (72%) say they have a way to inform staff of residents' personal interests.

## Communities Have a Method in Place to Keep Staff Informed of Residents' Unique Backgrounds and Interests



Almost three-quarters (72%) of community leaders say they have a method in place to keep staff informed of residents' personal interests. However, we do not know if all these efforts are proving effective, given that only 2 in 5 family members are very satisfied with staff knowledge of their senior. Part of the disconnect is likely an inability to effectively communicate this information to all staff, including new staff as they onboard, and integrate it into the resident experience.

Though the majority of communities (92%) believe using residents' backgrounds and interests to personalize care is extremely or very important to recruitment, only 33% say that it's very feasible. This could be because communities are gathering the information in ways that are difficult to truly integrate and use, like paper questionnaires and physical binders that sit on a shelf in someone's office. Digital profiles are the easiest and most effective way to integrate and use resident information, but only 31% of communities say they use them. Of all methods, a digital profile is most likely to get built into the staff workflow for providing care—100% of those who use digital profiles say they do this.

It's clear that communities need an efficient solution to both collect and manage resident information

**“ The disparity between what community leaders are observing and what residents and their families report is extremely concerning, yet also presents a tremendous opportunity. You can't address what you can't see. — Lisa Taylor, CEO, iN2L**

and make it accessible to staff to use to personalize activities. While this task has historically been siloed within the life enrichment team, every single staff member should be empowered to create tailored experiences for residents. This is feasible only if the information is put into an easy-to-use, actionable format that is passed on seamlessly to new and existing staff members during their normal workflow. Communities must safeguard their investments of time and energy into learning about residents by not allowing this knowledge to live where it is certain to be lost if an individual leaves, isn't on site, or isn't available.



92% of community leaders say using residents' interests to personalize care is important to recruitment, yet only 33% say that's feasible.

## Next Steps: Create Personalized Engagement and a Better Resident Experience

A lack of quality opportunities for socialization—both making friends and having opportunities to meaningfully spend time with them—is an ongoing issue that has been recently exacerbated for residents in senior living communities. In a tight and increasingly competitive market, it will be critical for senior living communities to solve for meaningful socialization in order to attract new residents and maintain occupancy. It's clear that effective relationship-building and beneficial socialization are foundationally critical for residents' families' overall satisfaction.

The pandemic has made this challenge all the more difficult, but it also presents an opportunity to focus on:

- Innovative socialization initiatives
- Methods to cultivate residents' relationships inside the community
- Solutions to empower all staff to tailor aspects of the resident experience to residents' backgrounds and interests

Solving for these issues will deliver key benefits to residents, of course, but it will also help communities stand out in a market that's becoming more competitive than ever before.



## Sources

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2. Margaret Wylde, Ph.D. and Kristen Paris, Ph.D., *People, Place, Programming: Quality of Life in Assisted Living* (Washington, D.C.: American Seniors Housing Association and ProMatura Group), 2019.
3. Gary Call, MD., "COVID-19 and Social Isolation Puts Elderly at Risk for Loneliness," *Journal of AHIMA*, August 14, 2020.
4. iN2L, *Senior Living 2020: The State of Engagement and Technology*, Report, 2020.
5. SageAge Strategies, *COVID-19 & Its Effects on the Senior Living Industry*, Report, May/June 2020.

## About iN2L

As the market leader in content-driven engagement for seniors, iN2L has been creating possibilities, enjoyment, and connection for older adults since 1999. iN2L's expansive content library promotes wellness, empowerment, and engagement among older adults and is the foundation for activities that facilitate social interaction, cognitive and physical exercise and therapy, education, reminiscing, areas of interest, and memory support engagement. iN2L is a critical part of the resident experience in more than 3,700 nursing homes, assisted and independent living communities, memory care settings, and adult day programs across the U.S. and Canada. For more information, visit [www.iN2L.com](http://www.iN2L.com).

