**Laci Cornelison**

In this episode of at Home We will discuss strategies to strengthen the workforce and improve recruitment and retention. Nikki Michael joins us from Prairie Mission retirement community in St. Paul, KS to share some of the ways in which they have persisted. During COVID, including their strategies for rebuilding a workforce post. Even I can't think of any home that has not been impacted by workforce challenges in the last two to three years. Prairie Mission is among those with challenges. However Prairie Missions’ team has maintained a core team that has persisted through the challenges, forging some very strong bonds with one another. And managed to be innovative along the way. I'm excited to hear more about the intentional strategies your team used in. This journey Nikki Are you ready to answer a few questions?

**Nikita Michael**

Yes, I sure AM.

**Laci Cornelison**

Briefly, talk about some of the specific challenges related to staffing that came out of the active COVID pandemic.

**Nikita Michael**

Well, there was a lot, so some of them that come to mind. I think initially we started losing a lot of staff, just overall different things that that we lost them to. Like agency staffing and they paid a lot. A lot of a lot of good money. To take some of the steps. Staff had nursing homes around us who were offering better pay. We also had staff that were fearful of the unknown of COVID. So, either you know patients that they might have had to take care of with COVID or family members who might be exposed from. From them working with patients with COVID org or themselves not wanting to get ill at all, or the last part that we were kind of shocked is the vaccine mandate that that made a lot of our staff who've been there a long time want to leave because they were being forced to be vaccinated? Let's see, we had to do a lot of things like adjusting hours to accommodate families who might have issues with COVID in their home. Or maybe they just were tired from the workload of COVID so they couldn't do full 12-hour shifts. And so sometimes we had to do half shifts and that also is something that we're continuing to do. Now we've learned that that's really helped in certain situations. And we also had to look at how the acuity of care was when we had COVID in our building. It really just changed the dynamic of how we cared for people and how much time you had to spend with them. So that was something we had to adjust that you know, one CNA could not accomplish the same thing with. 10 patients as it did before COVID, so that was really tough too. We always try with us being a nonprofit facility we had. We had to watch our overtime and that was something that as we were going through COVID we had to just kind of swallow down a little bit that the overtime was going to have to be there because some people couldn't work, and you needed staff there all the time. So we had to be OK with that and adjust that. And maybe make budget changes to accommodate for that. Also, we were losing revenue because we were so scared like everyone else that we stopped outsiders from coming in. As far as therapy companies, Hospice services, Podiatry, dental they those things. So that was, you know, a source of income. Also, something that was helping. As and as all of that kind of came to a halt for a couple of months. That really impacted us. And let's see, I'm having a hard time thinking of some of these things and let's see, oh agency, we did have to end up using agency in our building. First time ever I've worked there for a long time, but the building opened in 1994 and that's the first time that. We've ever had to use an agency. Staffing and we've never had so many on-site surveys since COVID hit, I believe there were seven. I think when I was speaking to the Administrator, Melinda Ewen, and we've had seven on site surveys for just the infection control and. And things like that so. That was a lot of challenges. Just a little, I'm sure there's more I'm missing, but yeah, that's the most of the ones I can come up with, I think.

**Laci Cornelison**

Yeah, and I'm sure that many of our audience listening to this podcast can relate to some of these challenges. What would you say now that the immediacy of the pandemic is past us, but we're still living in a post COVID world? How have things adjusted, you know, to what's different and what specific things are you doing? To recruit staff and keep staff.

**Nikita Michael**

Well, I think initially we were all just trying to, you know, fill the space. Make sure there was enough staff there, but you know with agency there was no buy in I think, and we all recognized that right away as although we were grateful to have them and there were some wonderful agency staff, and they had no clear understanding of what. Peak was and how we lived in. How we how we loved it? That actually didn't make your job harder. It made it easier. But trying to teach that while you're working at 12-14 hour shift and you've been there six days and it was just very challenging to try to. To do that. We did learn later on that we were teaching. And as we went. But at the time. It felt like we were just not accomplishing that. Also, I think that. We just kind of became accustomed to being OK that you don't. You may have hired on in this certain position, but this is. This is the place you want to be, you. You love working at Prairie Mission and so you're willing to be flexible and work. Maybe a 6-hour shift. On Saturday and take off Monday or something like that to just make sure that there's adequate coverage of staff and the residents. Get the care that they need, no matter if we do have to work at night or in the evening, or it's in overtime, just so long as at the end of the day. The residents are taking care of it. We all supported each other with that.

**Laci Cornelison**

Have some of the things that you did prior to COVID like your interview process and orientation and process. Have you been able to pick back up on some? Those things.

**Nikita Michael**

Yes, we have, and we really didn't have too much use for it. There, you know, during COVID it was really hard to get staff hired at that time, but now it's the same exact process. Some of the tweaks I think we might have made is that if they aren't available for, you know to come in in. We've kind of adjusted to getting a staff member and a resident and doing. A call a conference call with this staff member and getting them introduced you know that way if it can't be hands on our site, you know, let's see. I think. I mean, we really hadn't changed much of that process. We just hadn't been able to use it during that time frame because we were. We weren't just. We weren't hiring anyone during that time.

**Laci Cornelison**

And Prairie Mission is one of one of the upper-level homes. So, for those homes who don't know that integrative interview process, can you just briefly talk through that?

**Nikita Michael**

A little bit sure, sure. So, we want to have a new staff member who comes to our facility to have someone or multiple someone's so that they aren't walking in blind and don't know anyone. So, during the orientation or not orientation the interview process. We try to have a resident and a staff. Staff member who? Would be in that department that they would be hiring into part of the interview process. It's very low key, it's relaxed. We just ask some simple questions you know, geared around what they're going to do and then we get feedback from the resident or the staff member on maybe some additional questions that they might have. That they've seen, as you know, are. Are you willing to answer a call like even though you might be in, you know, the kitchen or things like that or the rest? We'll be like, so you're going to show up on time. Right, you know? That kind of thing. You know things that they live there. They know what they're dealing with, and what we're dealing with. And they want to make sure that if they're going to sign off on that staff member that they had a hand in on it. And so in in hindsight of that, the staff member also knows that when they come in. They can go oh hey. Eddie, Remember Me, you hired me, you know, and it they've got someone that they have built a connection with immediately. Mm-hmm great thank you.

**Laci Cornelison**

Have you been able to have clinicals back in your building?

**Nikita Michael**

Yes, we have we. We've had a lot actually within the last year, and we've actually hired new staff due to clinicals. They just love our facility and our residents and so we welcome those anytime that we can. It's wonderful to see. That that she from these new nursing students and Med aides and CNA's I tell you, it's just wonderful.

**Laci Cornelison**

Yeah, gives you hope, especially in light of a lot of the hard stuff.

**Nikita Michael**

It sure does. I was getting nervous that everybody was going to be getting out of health care. It almost felt like that. At one point.

**Laci Cornelison**

So, when you think back on some of the people who've walked with you and with Prairie mission through this difficult time, what are some of the stick-to-it stuff or the things you've done to pour into those people.

**Nikita Michael**

Well, I think we all just kind of set our mind to get through this. I mean, as you mentioned in the beginning, we. I have a core of staff members who have stuck, you know, through it and they love permission. They love their residents. They want to see our building stay open and succeed. And so, it was a group effort where we all were like, you know what? I'm not the only one that has ideas. What are your ideas? What do you think would help you know? Like these part hour shifts or adjusting to take a day off during the week to work the weekend? Those didn't come from administration. Those came from, you know, CNAs on the floor, dietary staff making ideas, housekeeping, making ideas, everybody is. As part of the conversation, it's not, you know we're mandating this, and this is how it is, and I think that's important, because then it's their facility. It's not boss and employee, you know.

**Laci Cornelison**

There's such that's such a big deal and yeah, yeah well, one of things I know about.

**Nikita Michael**

It is it really is.

**Laci Cornelison**

Permission is you received an award at the Person Center Care Conference for Innovation and through COVID. And it was for the implementation of a personalized laundry service that was initiated by someone in laundry. Can you just tell us a little bit about that?

**Nikita Michael**

Yeah, they really went far on that one. It was a wonderful thing. Something we had identified as something we wanted to do. During our peak, you know, as we were going up of our levels of peak and we finally were able to accomplish it, it was individualized laundering so that kind of seems overwhelming. You know to hear, but really it was not as hard as we initially thought. Although it did take some adjust. By staff and residents alike, but basically all it is at home you laundry your own laundry. So, we wanted to accomplish that for each individual residence. So, to put it kind of simply, we just divided up the rooms into certain days where they have their own laundry basket. And their laundry is washed on that day separate from everyone else. So, if maybe that process didn't work where it's once or twice a week, we would just individualize it to maybe you know they needed to have their laundry washed every two days or something like that. And once we got it down, it flowed. It's now the new normal, but it was. It was quite a challenge and completely led by the House. Housekeeping department they did a wonderful job so.

**Laci Cornelison**

That's quite a quite an accomplishment anytime, but especially during COVID really cool story. And goes to show the empowerment that as a as a leader, that laundry team really. Led that but.

**Nikita Michael**

Yes, they did.

**Laci Cornelison**

It was supported through leaders as well. So very cool. Well, my last question for you is are there things that you feel are important for other nursing home providers to know that I haven't asked about?

**Nikita Michael**

Well, I feel like we. We touched on one of the main thing is, she's just making sure that everybody's willing to be flexible, not just your frontline staff but also your administrative team. I know you know part of peak is having the staff involvement in things and so I just I just want to stress that having the staff be involved in your scheduling. Practices I kind of wanted to touch on that earlier, but I. Didn't is that I don't do the schedule, I'm kind of in charge of making sure it it's done every month, but we have frontline staff who look at what's going on in in our Staffs life. Or maybe they need a day off here and there and they work together and they get that figured out. And that's huge because. Then you have less call-ins. If they have the time off. That they need. We also encourage that if they have something come up, they need to have an almost like a buddy system where there's somebody that. They know they could flip. Flop a date with and go from there and see. We do a lot of incentives that we've learned over time. Now we're a non for-profit facility, so we have to be. Gentle on how we do things, but we've also done some adjustments like attendance bonuses where if they don't call in they get a little bump. We try to ingest our wages to be comparable. Around us, we do referral bonuses and that's for residents or staff alike because we want to make sure that we're bringing in. Good staff and we want happy residents, and they know people already from out of the Community. It's going to feel like home for them. Gosh I I feel like I'm talking so much but there's just so much that we have done that I'm not. Sure, I could fit it all in.

**Laci Cornelison**

It's wonderful.

**Nikita Michael**

Just encouraging leadership. You know, it doesn't have to come. I've been there a long time and and my heart is at permission, but it's not just us, it's everyone. If not, everyone wants to do a good job, then it doesn't matter how good of a leader you are. You know you have to make sure that those people. Want to be there and if they don't figure out why and see if you can change that line just set, I guess. It's just important, yeah?

**Laci Cornelison**

Building leaders across. Well Nikki, thanks so much for your time and sharing. Some of these tips with our audience.

**Nikita Michael**

Of course, of course, thank you for having us. We appreciate that.

**Laci Cornelison**

Yeah, thank you.

**Nikita Michael**

Have a good day.