

# News and Tribune

Community Focused. Community Minded. | (812) 283-6636

TOPICAL FEATURED

## Local families stay connected with loved ones in nursing homes

By BROOKE MCAFEE [brooke.mcafee@newsandtribune.com](mailto:brooke.mcafee@newsandtribune.com) Mar 25, 2020



**Clarksville resident** John Ferguson visits his mother, Martha Taylor, through a window at Clark Rehabilitation and Skilled Nursing Center in Clarksville. The nursing home has restricted in-person visits due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Submitted photos

SOUTHERN INDIANA — For Clarksville resident John Ferguson, the coronavirus pandemic has put his family in a difficult situation.

Since late January, his 87-year-old mother, Martha Taylor, has been living at Clark Rehabilitation and Skilled Nursing Center in Clarksville, but with the risks presented by COVID-19, the nursing home has recently restricted in-person visits.

Although he cannot meet with his mother as usual, he is still finding ways to visit with her while maintaining a physical distance.

Ferguson is among the many people around the world who are now visiting their loved ones in nursing homes through a window or finding new ways to stay connected during temporary visitor restrictions. As he stands outside the window of the nursing home, they talk over the phone.

Martha has dementia, and she does not understand why her family is not visiting in-person. Ferguson said he has the impression that she feels abandoned.

“She’s continually asking, when is she going to see me and can she come home,” he said. “Right now she can’t, but she just doesn’t understand.”

Ferguson has made several “window visits” since the restrictions were put in place at the nursing home, and the facility staff have helped coordinate the visits. On Sunday, he and his wife brought their puppy to cheer up his mother, and her face “lit up,” he said.

“It’s really helped us a lot just to see her face,” Ferguson said. “I can tell she’s so happy, and it comforts her to see us.”

“I’m just so thrilled to come and do window time with her,” he said. “A phone call is not personal enough.”

Marjorie Davis’s 49-year-old son, Eric, has been a resident at Hillcrest Village in Jeffersonville for about two years. He is autistic, and he was born with minimal brain damage. Although he initially experienced separation anxiety when he came to the facility, she has been pleased to see how well he has handled the current situation.

“I can’t believe it, but he’s done so well,” she said. “A mom worries — he had never been away from me like that.”

She previously would visit Eric about every three days, and now, she calls him on a regular basis. He doesn’t have a cell phone himself, but his friend at the nursing home lends him her phone. Although she can’t visit him, she stops by a couple of times a week to drop off snacks for her son, and in the future, she might visit him through one of the windows of the facility.

Floyds Knobs resident Linda Libs Smith, 72, has not been able to visit her husband, Richard Smith, in-person at the Villages at Historic Silvercrest assisted living facility since the restrictions were put in place. The staff at the facility help him use an iPad to FaceTime with her about twice a day.

Richard, 76, has been at Silvercrest since November. He has had Parkinson’s Disease for years, and after he had a stroke in November, his condition worsened, and Linda could no longer be his caregiver.

“Our motto is to take it one day at a time, and we’ve been doing that for a long time with his health and everything else,” she said.

The couple has been married for 53 years, and they have both struggled with being apart. Linda, who is currently homebound, used to visit Richard every day, and it is important for her to be able to see his face while talking, even if it’s just over FaceTime. It is sometimes difficult to understand his speech due to his condition, so it helps to be able to read his lips, she said.

Her husband gets confused about the situation, and he has asked if Linda is going to come and get him, which brings her to tears, she said. One of the hardest parts of the situation has been hearing how depressed and lonely he is about being apart, but the staff at the facility has been working to lift their spirits.

The staff at Silvercrest recently sent her a video of Richard dancing in his wheelchair, and it made her day, she said. The staff also set up FaceTime so she could watch as he opened a care package from his granddaughter, which brought him to tears.

“It’s hard — everybody is in a bad situation right now, and we’re all trying to make the best of the situation,” Linda said. “Sometimes it takes a village, and I feel like I have a village over there.”

## COPING WITH THE SITUATION

Fred Stratmann, spokesperson for CommuniCare Family of Companies, said the nursing home company's facilities are working to balance safety of the residents with important connections with family members. The company's local facilities include Rolling Hills Healthcare Center in New Albany and Sellersburg Healthcare Center in Sellersburg.

During the visit restrictions, the staff at the facilities are setting up Skype or FaceTime for the residents to talk to loved ones.

"What people are doing is bonding together and making the best of a difficult situation," he said.

Sherri Davies, vice president of marketing and sales at American Senior Communities, said the nursing home network's facilities have been finding ways to help their residents cope with the visit restrictions, including coordinating window visits and video conferencing chats. The company's locations include Hillcrest Village in Jeffersonville and Clark Rehabilitation and Skilled Nursing Center and Riverview Village in Clarksville.

"We understand that while window visits, phone chats and emails are not going to replace a hug, what we are trying to do is get very creative ensuring we can get them as connected as possible," she said.

The nursing home staff have been taking photos and videos of the residents to send to their loved ones, and Davies also encourages families to share photos and videos of themselves with loved ones living in the facilities while they are apart.

"It's a tough time to be separated from loved ones," she said. "How people are rising to challenge and finding ways to stay connected, it's just beautiful, and it reaffirms why love this profession so much."