

# NJBIZ

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The stalemate in Washington over a new pandemic relief bill threatens to squelch the economic activity generated by Newark Liberty International Airport. **Page 6**

VOLUME 33 NUMBER 39 ■ NJBIZ.COM

Part of the BRIDGETOWER MEDIA network

OCTOBER 12, 2020 ■ \$2.00

# CULTIVATING SUPPORT

Polls suggest that the ballot question on legalizing marijuana for adults is likely to pass. But advocates face significant obstacles in reaching voters and opponents are organized for a fight. **PAGE 9**

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## Spotlight: Engineering

How the industry is handling the pandemic; where the exciting R&D is happening; and how firms are promoting diversity and inclusion. **Page 13**

# CARE AT A DISTANCE

## Technology fills a critical void as long-term living communities prepare for a second wave of COVID-19

BY ROBERTO MUÑIZ

As we enter the fall season, the chance of resurgence in COVID-19 cases remains top of mind, especially for health care providers.

Just like we've seen in Britain, France, Germany and other European countries, New Jersey needs to be fully prepared for a second spike. For those who work in long-term care, it is our utmost responsibility to be ready and equipped with protocols that would limit exposure, based on lessons learned this spring and summer.

At Parker, like other long-term living communities, we are implementing best practices and protocols to not only limit exposure but combat the psychological effects a quarantine brings. Many of these solutions rely on technology. Let me explain how, with the hope that our commitment to purpose-drive screen time may help others preparing for an uptick in coronavirus cases.

The widespread use of the internet became critical at Parker when COVID-19 first hit. Anticipating the need for our elders to remain engaged prompted us to provide additional tablets, video calling capabilities, robust WiFi connections and hands-on training to promote ongoing communication between our residents and their loved ones.

We also greatly expanded technology for virtual sessions so that outside health care providers can provide "house calls" online with our residents. Our care partners also increased online programming to bring services to people at home, especially to those who typically participate in our Adult Day programs, including health, wellness and rehabilitation sessions.

Moreover, and just as important, technology has been used to nurture vibrant social engagement, which we see as critical to reducing feelings of loneliness and give meaning and purpose to our residents and those who participate in our Home and Community programs. We're providing interactive programming, such as painting classes, trivia games and stimulating social activities via Zoom and other free, easy-to-use platforms. Elders have enjoyed virtual birthday parties, card games, graduations and other family events, safely and securely.

We also recommend virtual reality technology, a unique tool that Parker residents have truly embraced. We had been considering piloting the technology long before COVID-19 but were prompted to launch it during this pandemic to directly address isolation. It is making a remarkable difference socially and emotionally with our elders, who are enthusiastically embracing the opportunity to visit the wonders of the



DEPOSIT PHOTOS

world, as well as their childhood homes, without the need to leave the house.

I'm thankful for this day and age where we can use the latest resources to combat a stubborn, lingering pandemic. I'm also thankful for our in-house IT team, helping our residents maximize the possibilities and stay connected. We directly address the learning curve, following a recent Pew Research Center study showing one-third of people ages 65 and older don't use the Internet.

Technological enhancements not only prevent the spread of COVID-19, but help our elders continue to celebrate life.

They are also part of updated protocols that long-term living communities need to move beyond the pandemic and focus on a healthy, nurturing environment for the next generation of residents. Constant innovation has been one of our key attractions to families; this pandemic has only furthered that commitment.

As we prepare for whatever health challenges loom on the horizon, our industry must remain vigilant, flexible and focused. Together, we must be steadfast in our commitment to provide exceptional care to the elder population - come a second wave or not.

*Roberto Muñiz is president and chief executive officer of Piscataway-based Parker Health Group Inc.*

#### STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP

#### MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Requester Publications Only)

NJBIZ; Publication number 3345; The Mailing address of the Known Office of Publication, 1500 Paxton Street, Harrisburg, PA 17104, Dauphin County. The Mailing address of the Headquarters and General Business Offices of the Publisher (not printer), 1500 Paxton Street, Harrisburg, PA 17104, Dauphin County. The Full Names and Addresses of the Publisher, Editor and Managing Editor are: Ken Kiczales (Publisher), 220 Davidson Ave. Ste. 122, Somerset, NJ 08873, Jeff Kanige (Editor) 220 Davidson Ave. Ste. 122, Somerset, NJ 08873, Managing Editor: Linda Lindner, 220 Davidson Ave. Ste. 122, Somerset, NJ 08873.

NJBIZ is owned by New Media Investment Group, Inc., 1345 Avenue of the Americas, 46th Fl., New York, NY 10105. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities, Citizens Bank NA, 28 State Street, MS 1500, Boston MA 02109.

Issue Date for Circulation Data is August 31, 2020; the average number of copies of each issue during the preceding 12 months is: (A) Total number of copies printed 9,582. (B1) Paid/ Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions 5,995; (B2) Paid In-County Subscriptions: 0; (B3) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales: 0; (B4) Other classes mailed USPS: 0; (C) Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 5,995; (D1) Non-Requested Distribution by mail, samples complimentary and other free copies: 3,417; (D2) In-county Non-Requested distribution: 0; (D3) Other classes mailed Non-Requested Distribution: 0; (D4) Non-Requested distribution outside the mail: 0; (E) Total Non-Requested distribution: 3,417; (F) Total Distribution: 9,412; (G) Copies not Distributed: 170; (H) Total: 9,582; (I) Percent of Paid: 63.70%.

The actual number of copies of a single issue published nearest to the filing date are: (A) Total number of copies printed 6,178; (B1) Paid/ Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions: 4,285; (B2) Paid In-County Subscriptions: 0; (B3) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales: 0; (B4) Other classes mailed USPS: 0; (C) Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation: 4,285; (D1) Non-Requested Distribution by mail, samples complimentary and other free copies: 1,826; (D2) In-county Non-Requested distribution: 0; (D3) Other classes mailed Non-Requested Distribution: 0; (D4) Non-Requested distribution outside the mail: 0 (E) Total Non-Requested distribution: 1,826; (F) Total Distribution: 6,111; (G) Copies not Distributed: 67; (H) Total: 6,178; (I) Percent of Paid: 70.12%.

Electronic Copy Circulation; The Average number of copies in the last 12 months was: (16A) Requested/Paid Electronic Copies, 635; (16B) Total Paid Print and Paid Digital Copies were 6,630; (16C) Total Print and Paid Digital Distribution was 10,047; (16D) Percent Paid of Both Print & Paid Digital was 65.99%.

Electronic Copy Circulation; The Actual Number of Copies of a Single Issue (16A) Paid Electronic Copies, 721; (16B) The Paid Print and Paid Digital Copies were 5,006 (16C) The Total Print and Paid Digital Distribution was 6,832; (16D) Percent Paid of Both Print & Paid Digital was 73.27%.

(Signed) Ken Kiczales, Publisher

REQUIRED BY TITLE 39 U.S.C. 3685 STATEMENT SHOWING OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION OF NJBIZ, publication number 3345, filed October 1, 2020, Published Weekly, except the first week of July, September and the last week of November and December, 48 issues per year, \$79 annually, at 1500 Paxton Street, Harrisburg, PA 17104, Dauphin County. The General Business offices of the Publishers are at 1500 Paxton Street, Harrisburg, PA 17104, Dauphin County.