

VOICES

Fil Southerland, Director of Healthcare Solutions, Yardi

In this Voices interview, Senior Housing News sat down with Fil Southerland, director of healthcare solutions at Yardi®, to talk about the biggest changes in senior living technology during the COVID-19 pandemic, how technology needs are meeting new healthcare demands and his experience growing up in Idaho while his father operated assisted living facilities and built his own technology platform to support them.



One of the early outcomes of the pandemic was the increase in technology adoption. What are the biggest silver linings in terms of senior living technology?

Fil Southerland: COVID has definitely been particularly hard on our industry and the residents we're caring for. I think what it's really highlighted is the incredible resilience of the organizations and their staff members that we work with. I've been particularly impressed with the amount of rapid innovation and technology uptake within the industry. It's been inspiring to see how much we've progressed since the onset. For example, we've seen telehealth come to the forefront as a new expectation of physician offices, and this technology growth has spurred innovation within the senior living industry as well.

Yardi's contribution is a broad-based platform that helps providers efficiently manage everything from the care-related side to operations to finances. We've continued to add new clients at a rapid pace and we're also seeing our existing clients working to automate and streamline a lot of their workflows.

I think that kind of technology adoption is a necessity now. Over the long term, we're hopeful that it will produce a lot of good dividends for the industry in terms of care coordination and personalization, wellness, operational efficiency and risk mitigation.

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You just named a number of areas where senior living technology is changing due to the pandemic. Which of these changes do you think will last?

We're seeing lasting impact in many areas. I'll highlight three. The first is marketing and admissions. Previously, residents or family members had to come into communities to sign leases or changes to service plans. Yardi has a solution that allows all of that to be done online. We've seen a lot of interest in that.

Turning to the second area, families considering a community are really concerned not only about amenities but how the wellness programs are working for their family members, the quality of care provided and how they can participate in that care. There has been a lot of advancement there. Families are working hard to stay engaged and work with the community staff to remain connected at a distance.

And finally, on the care side, I have seen a lot of innovation with interoperability. CMS and CDC have reporting requirements that we're helping facilitate. We've brought online the ability to exchange health records via the Carequality network, which is also notable. As residents transition through care, Yardi can work effectively with third parties to exchange health records with an increased emphasis on coordinating between the different care settings.

A lot has changed as a result of the pandemic, and it seems like that longstanding debate in senior housing about hospitality versus health care has been revived. What have you heard from operators since March about their increased health care technology needs?

We've seen more sophistication about technology in organizations that emphasize the health care side as well as those that place a premium on hospitality. We're also seeing increased coordination among hospital systems, skilled nursing communities and, to some extent, assisted living. We weren't sure what to expect when COVID hit, but it's turned out to be an acceleration for Yardi with the technology uptake.

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We work with a diverse client base ranging from independent care to assisted living and skilled nursing. A key trend our clients are reporting is a lot more coordination between health care entities, as well as regulatory entities, at the local, state and national levels. Everyone is focused on care outcomes as well. Having a way to facilitate that across those spectrums is important, as is being able to prove to families that this is a safe and welcoming environment that respects resident preferences in their care decisions.

What is your major takeaway on how operators have responded to the challenge?

It's really been very inspiring. This industry is a group of people who show up and care for others in the face of a lot of challenges — and often without a lot of recognition. To see them continue to adapt to new regulations and reporting requirements, and innovate through that, has really been heartening. Clients are pushing forward through this at the community and organizational levels, and the progress has just been tremendous over the last three to six months.

I want to shift gears and get into your own story. Tell us about your father and how he created the healthcare platform ALMSA.

My dad has always been an inspiration. He was a pioneer in the assisted living industry. He started a management group in Idaho when I was about eight years old, so I've been in the industry for a long time. He had seven communities and my brother J.R. and I were involved from a very young age on the operational level, working with staff, talking to residents, doing maintenance— pretty much everything. As we scaled up the organization, we found that we were driving from community to community throughout the week, and it just became, over time, unsustainable to continue to drive so much and expand with so many paper-based processes.

Around 1996, Dad made the decision to start a software company, ALMSA, to manage assisted living. We used it internally for about four years. Over time, to fund the growth of the business, he sold off the communities one by one. We expanded first in Idaho, then nationally, and became one of the first internet based EMR systems focused on long-term care.

We had a modest start in the early days of the internet with clients still using dial-up modems. Over time, the platform became much more sophisticated, and utilized by national providers. In 2012, we were acquired by Yardi. The momentum has continued from there.

How does that experience motivate you in the work that you do today?

What has always stayed with me is the human factor. One of the things we would do as we visited my father's communities was sit and talk with residents and listen to their stories. We would usually do that on the front porch, and it was always interesting to hear everybody's background.

We've really tried to empathize with the experience of both residents and staff members. With Yardi, the platform has grown much more in sophistication, but I think a lot of the original concepts are still built into the platform that we have today. One example in Yardi EHR is the resident storyboard, where we surface a resident's social background alongside their care needs, so that caregivers can quickly get to know those they're caring for.

The emotional component of what senior housing operators have to do has never been more important. What is the top way that technology can support the emotional needs of residents, staff and families?

We're an industry where the care and operational decisions of our clients really matter in the quality of residents' day-to-day life, so Yardi's goal from a technology standpoint is just to listen and recognize the needs of our users. We do a lot of development based on user feedback. That's really where we're focused, and our goal is to give users the information they need to make the best decisions.

At the end of the day, what we want to do with the technology is provide information to the frontline staff, operators, corporations or organizations so that everyone can make the right human-level decisions and operate efficiently in a way that provides the best care possible.

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Lastly, we don’t know what will happen with the pandemic moving forward, but what are the biggest lessons that Yardi has learned that you think will influence the way the company operates in 2021 and beyond?

Very early on during the pandemic, we knew it was important to us to maintain the human connection, even though it couldn’t be in person. We reached out to our clients just to see how everybody was doing. It wasn’t to make a sale. We wanted to hear everybody’s needs and be there through this. I think that’s something that we’ve continued – really just listening to people.

In terms of our own team here at Yardi, we transitioned to work-from-home within a period of just a few weeks and we’ve been able to see the teams stay cohesive. I would say our coordination and productivity have stayed steady, if not improved. That’s been really heartening to see. In a way, it’s just a privilege to be here at this moment in time, where we’re able to provide a technology platform that helps other teams face this challenge that’s out there and, I hope, come out better on the other side.

Editor’s note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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