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FEATURED

## Behind the scenes of the pandemic

By Allison Rajala Ahcan  
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Submitted photo

Bigfork Valley Director of Nursing Deb Morell RN (center) with members of the Bigfork Valley care team Michael Martin Rahier RN and Cydney Neuenschwander RN. Not one resident of Bigfork Valley's long-term care facilities have contracted COVID during the pandemic.

***Skilled nursing facilities with extraordinary and protective employees***



Director of Nursing Deb Morell and her husband sold their house in mid-2019 and moved permanently to their family cabin near Bigfork. He had just retired, and the plan was that she too would ease into retirement, with the final leg of her career at Bigfork Valley Long Term Care.

“I was planning to make my life easier, but then the pandemic hit,” she said.

Morell began her career as a nursing assistant in Hibbing in 1977, when she tagged along with a friend who was applying at the Hibbing nursing home. She was recruited on the spot and told to go straight to Penny’s to pick out a uniform.

“What kept me in nursing? I guess I’m kind of stubborn, I don’t give up,” said Morell. “And I like to do good things for people—especially the elderly. It means a lot to make sure they are safe and healthy. They have done so much in their lives and deserve to be treated well.”

Little did she know, Morell’s stubbornness would come in handy. The Bigfork Valley care team has made sure that not one resident in their long-term care facility contracted COVID-19 and no staff got seriously ill during the entire pandemic. They built a testing routine that went even beyond regulations and all residents and staff are either vaccinated or exempted. All nursing staff are trained and empowered to administer COVID tests, any time of day and at any sign of illness.

“Those who work here are extraordinary people. With everything that they have gone through, they’re still coming to work every day and taking care of people. It’s really amazing,” said Morell. She also reports that the culture among staff is strongly



protective, and anybody with any sign of illness stays home. “Even if you don’t have COVID, you shouldn’t have to work when you are sick and you are not penalized. This work is hard enough.”

“It was a huge undertaking for our staff, so much to get used to – masks, goggles, gowns, restrictions, cleaning everything constantly,” said Morell. “We figured out how to do Facetime, ZOOM and window visits to keep up communications with families. It was very, very hard at first.

“Some families hadn’t seen their loved ones for months until they were on their deathbeds. It was really sad, and we didn’t have a choice. Sometimes, residents had to be isolated because they may have been exposed. They could crochet and watch TV, but for those with dementia it was especially disorienting.

“Through it all, though, families trusted and believed in us. And that meant a lot.”

With tests, masks and vaccines now available, Bigfork Valley residents are able to have visitors. The routines for staff have become routine and easier.

The next challenge, said Morell, is to hire and train more staff. Bigfork Valley Long Term Care is licensed to serve 40 residents and has temporarily scaled back to serving half that, in order to ensure quality care. The greatest need, she said, are for full- and part-time assistants who can receive training on-site at Bigfork Valley.

What does Morell wish that more people understood about what's happening behind the scenes of the pandemic? "Everybody is tired of it and want it to be over. The only way it really will be over, though, is if we stick to our rules," she said.

