

Community-centered

From 'Nightmare on Elm Street' to the streets of New Delhi, a New Jersey facility receives a cultural makeover to become a success story



Photos: AristaCare



BY BRETT BAKSHIS

When AristaCare took over the Alameda Center for Rehabilitation and Care in July of 2004, officials knew they had a lot of work ahead.

The building itself was run down, a decrepit fixture of the neighborhood surrounding Elm Street in Perth Amboy, NJ. Such were the horrors of the facility, the community dubbed it the 'Nightmare on Elm Street.' In that summer of 2004, occupancy at the failing care center was at an all-time low: only 140 of the 250 beds were filled.

"It's really very challenging to take over a ... failing facility," reflected Renee Pruzansky, senior vice president for AristaCare, and the woman in charge of turning the place around.

The Alameda Center for Rehabilitation and Care appeals to the diverse cultures of its inhabitants. From mariachi bands to Indian religious services, the facility strives to make Hispanic and Indian residents feel at home.

The question was: How does one take a ramshackle nursing home with barely more than half its beds filled, and bring it up to world-class standards? The answer lay in the community.

"When patients are in a comfortable environment that's familiar to them, it's much better," she says.

Perth Amboy, NJ, has a large Indian and Hispanic population. So Pruzansky turned her nursing home into a veritable United Nations of rehab facilities.

Small world after all

"Walk off the elevator onto the third floor, and you could swear you're in India," Pruzansky says.

After extensive talks with people from

Lessons learned

- 1 When trying to boost your census, consider the needs of the local community
- 2 Language barriers can be broken. A fluent staff can make foreign residents feel at ease
- 3 Spending money and increasing staff may hurt at first, but it can pay off in the long run

the area about what they would like in a nursing home, Pruzansky set to work designing a "new world" for the Alameda residents. "I specifically took [the design] in my hands because I didn't want the normal nursing home design," she explains.

Normal it is not: The third floor is dedicated to the Indian community. From the drapes and doorframes down to the sounds and smells, the entire floor is truly representative of the Indian way of life. There are cultural activities and games, Indian entertainment and traditional religious services. There's even a special cable TV feed with programming from India.

And as far as the language barrier is concerned, the entire staff on the third floor speaks Hindi.

"Patients find peace and enjoyment at this facility," says Pruzansky. "They gain weight, smile, talk, eat and get their personalities back when they can talk to people in their native language."

Similarly, the fourth floor is dedicated to the local Hispanic community. Activities, decorations and a staff fluent in Spanish make the floor feel like home to those who live there. Occasionally, a mariachi band will swing by to entertain the residents.

To deal with the dietary demands of the different cultures, separate kitchens were built.

Investment in success

Redesigning the facility to meet the needs of the community has worked wonders for AristaCare and Alameda. Within a year of the remodel, the census hit 95%, up from 56% at the start of the project.

But such success doesn't come cheap. "We spent a lot of money," Pruzansky says, noting that renovating the Hispanic and Indian units cost about \$75,000.

Still, "If you're committed to doing the right thing for the patient, you'll be spending money for a few years, but it'll be worth it," she says. ■