

A CULTURE OF

BY SARAH LEBO

understanding

LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES ADDRESS COMMUNICATION,
CULTURAL CHALLENGES WITH ETHNIC-SPECIFIC PROGRAMS

Many people derive their sense of self from their cultural and family traditions. As they reach their twilight years, most typically maintain the fundamental principles that initially shaped their philosophy of life.

Unfortunately, long-term care facilities are often models of cookie-cutter similarity, offering religious and cultural services for all, but usually without fulfilling a precise and unambiguous ideology for residents.

Several LTC facilities in the region are trying to change that approach by creating culture-specific programs that cater to a culturally diverse population.

"Coming into long-term care involves a lot of loss for people — of relationships and activities that defined who they are," explained chaplain Sheila Segal at Madlyn and Leonard Abramson Center for Jewish Life, Horsham, PA. "These people are very much in need of whatever will help them affirm a sense of identity, dignity and connection. That's why it's so important to address the cultural and spiritual aspects of their lives."

"One of the most important aspects of getting older is maintaining as much as you possibly can," added Marianne Brown, LPN, a staff nurse at the Abramson Center. "Dementia takes away a lot of mental processes but anything a long-term care facility can provide to help residents keep in touch with reality is beneficial. Many times they're most comfortable reverting back to the beliefs and traditions they grew up with."

PROMOTING CONTINUITY

The United States remains a country of diverse backgrounds. The nation's foreign-born population numbered 34.2 million in 2004, accounting for 12 percent of the total U.S. population, according to U.S. Census Bureau data released last February. In 2002, it was estimated that 1-in-5 U.S. residents was either foreign-born or a first generation U.S. citizen, according to the bureau.



TIME FOR FIESTA! A 5-piece mariachi band (above) performs Nov. 3 during an open house for the new Hispanic Unit at Alameda Center for Rehabilitation and Care, Perth Amboy, NJ. Pedro Vargas (right), a resident at Alameda, accompanied the mariachi band by playing the guiro during the celebration.



"Addressing cultural issues in long-term care involves recognizing what the face of America is today," explained Neila Kennedy, RN,C, corporate director of clinical services for Garden State Healthcare Group, which operates Alameda Center for Rehabilitation and Care, Perth Amboy, NJ. "America is all about ethnic diversity and separate cultures respecting each other, and long-term care facilities need to respond to that."

Facilities that ignore ethnic and cultural beliefs often face the danger of residents acting out or being unable to communicate effectively with staff, whether it is a language barrier, a typical misunderstanding or anger issue.

"These people are considered 'confused residents' because they ▶

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cannot communicate with the staff," said Michael Neiman, Alameda administrator. "We've seen the health of the elderly turn around when their cultural needs are met in our Indian and Spanish programs at Alameda. These people are no longer losing weight, because their food preferences are finally being met, and they're no longer considered 'combative' or 'confused' because they're being understood and have people around who can relate to them.

"It is important that elderly residents age comfortably and live in a place where their culture is not only respected, but understood," Neiman added.

SETTING THE SCENE

Much of the planning behind ethnic programs comes from research into a particular culture. Neiman and Kennedy had a general understanding of this from working at Resort Nursing Home, Queens, NY, where they managed two floors which were tailored to the needs of residents with Russian backgrounds.

"I knew that programs like this worked," Neiman said. "The Russian residents loved it there. They had their own Russian-speaking staff, food preferences, and basically felt like they were back at home in their country even though they were in the United States."

Alameda had nothing like that until a few months ago, when Garden State Healthcare Group took over management at Alameda Center. Sidney Greenberger, CEO, believed strongly in addressing the needs of the community — so when a CNA suggested that an Indian long-term care program was needed, the program was born.

"Dr. Mukund Thakar had a dream. In his country he was a doctor, here he's a CNA because of financial constraints that immigrants often face," Neiman said. "He asked me to help him start a program at Alameda because he knew that the Indian elderly were scattered in different nursing homes, and their religious and cultural preferences were not being met."

Neiman and Thakar went to work, planning a unit with the capacity of 50 beds. An interior decorator specializing in Indian décor was hired to renovate the floor with cultural colors, pictures and religious symbols. To promote their program, Alameda started a marketing campaign. They notified newspapers with an Indian target audience and posted signs in Indian food markets in the area. One month later, on July 1, the unit was ready and Alameda admitted its first Indian resident. There are now 30 residents on the unit.

The idea was such a hit with residents that Alameda opened another cultural program Nov. 3: a Spanish and Latino floor.

"Perth Amboy has a predominately Spanish and Latino population, so this was a natural next step," Neiman explained. "While we have a lot of Spanish staff, we hadn't previously had a true Spanish program where the floor's signs are in Spanish, the décor is Latino and the food is prepared by a Spanish cook, like we have now."

ADDING THE EXTRAS

Cultural issues have also been incorporated into the activities and treatment approaches at Alameda. A Latina herself, Paula Chica, LPN, understands the routines her residents feel most comfortable with.

"Knowing information about residents' cultures makes it easier for patients and nurses to relate to each other," explained Chica, charge



courtesy Abramson Center for Jewish Life

MAKE READY: Marianne Brown, LPN, helps resident Martha Segal prepare for a Shabbat Warm-up program at Madlyn and Leonard Abramson Center for Jewish Life, Horsham, PA. Shabbat (Hebrew for Sabbath) begins Friday evening at sunset, so the facility begins preparations the day before to welcome the occasion.

nurse for Alameda's Hispanic program. "It's very important for the Hispanic population to get up in the morning and have a cup of coffee, first thing. We understand little things like that and it often makes residents more comfortable with us."

Nurses also need to be conscious of other certain cultural practices such as having siesta after lunch or afternoon tea. Though all the residents at the Abramson Center are Jewish, the staff does not need to be, which means education about Jewish culture is important.

"Part of our new employee orientation provides some background in what it means to be in a Jewish home, and the importance of our traditions," Segal explained. "We give introductions to key Jewish symbols, holidays and the basics of keeping kosher. We try to help staff understand why all these things are important to our Jewish residents."

"We have inservices every year to remind us what the Jewish holidays are, what they mean and how we need to prepare for them," Brown added. "I enjoy it. I even bring my med cart to the area where residents gather weekly for Shabbat music, so I can watch the residents and give meds after. I've learned some of the Jewish songs from doing that."

Though they educate staff on Jewish customs, Abramson Center administrators also make it clear that each staff member's personal beliefs are respected.

"We feel that kind of mutual respect is really important," Segal said.

Brown believes residents enjoy a greater quality of life and enjoyment by maintaining a cultural connection.

"Their spiritual life has a lot to do with how residents are going to feel that day," she explained. "If you're upset, that can lead to a headache or a stomachache. Uplifting a person's spirit, whether through quality nursing care or cultural offerings, helps combat those feelings. It's about understanding and making residents feel like they belong and they can trust us. That's part of treating the whole person." ■

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