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Facility eyes specialized ethnic programs

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The Perth Amboy Nursing Home was facing closure when Garden State Healthcare Group took over in August 2004. The facility itself required multiple exterior and interior improvements, and the patient services required major review. As with any new venture, management took a good hard look at the overall state of the property, welcoming suggestions from the staff as to how to make the new facility a more successful enterprise and a more inviting place for residents.

One recurring theme was the reported disconnect between ethnicity and positive response to care. According to the 2000 census, Perth Amboy's population is 70 percent Hispanic, which suggested that language and cultural barriers may have acted as impediments to patients' medical progress, a situation the Garden State Healthcare Group hoped to remedy.

In August 2004, the facility was renamed the Alameda Center, offering sub-acute care, rehabilitative services and long-term care within the six-floor building. The new and im-

proved 250-bed Alameda Center increased staffing by 60 percent in response to the 40 percent resident increase it experienced within the first five months of operation. Extensive cosmetic improvements also were made to the center's interior and exterior, and a state-of-the-art cardiac telemetry unit was put into place.

One other drastic change was made that proved to be an operational innovation: The Alameda Center invoked the policy of designating specific units for specialized ethnic programs for the Indian and Hispanic communities.

"We wanted to take into account the cultural needs of the community," said Michael Nleman, administrator of Alameda Center. "It's always been a challenge for families to find quality care for their loved ones, and we thought that by providing ethnic food and religious services, ethnic doctors and staff, and cultural activities and decor that was in keeping with residents' backgrounds, we could create a much more inviting place."

Dr. Gregorio J. Guillen is the Hispanic medical director at the Alameda Center. As an internist, he regularly monitors the progress of the patients he treats, and he has found patients to be far more receptive to care under the current system.

"My patients are happier and they feel more at home," he said. "When patients see reminders of home, and staff that speak the same language they learned in childhood, they feel a

sense of comfort.

"Patients who do not understand what doctors and aides are telling them may not want to eat or accept treatment."

"We tried to mirror what people are used to in their native lands," said Jorge Gonzalez-Gomez, Hispanic program director at the center. "And it's the little things that make a difference. For example, we have a priest who speaks Spanish offer Mass to patients. And I know of one man in a wheelchair who rarely speaks just light up when the mariachi band comes in to play. It's just amazing."

The Indian program was initiated in June and was followed by a Hispanic program in November.

"We have hired Asian-Indian chefs, and a shrine for religious services is also available to patients," Nleman said.

"We are offering a unique program," said Sidney Greenberger, CEO of Garden State Healthcare Group. "We realized we had an opportunity with the Alameda Center to do something special for patients. Family members tell us they feel more at ease having their loved ones in a place where they receive such specialized care."

The Alameda Center has had to address the issue of segregation, and whether physically separating members of different cultures truly reflects the American ideal of the melting pot.

"The residents choose to be in the unit," Greenberger said. And there are scheduled activities like Bingo that bring residents of many different cultures together."