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LATINO PATIENTS FIND OWN CULTURE ON FIFTH FLOOR

Nursing home focuses on ethnic needs

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PERTH AMBOY: Paula Chica, a charge nurse at the Alameda Center for Rehabilitation and Care, has noticed a change in Marina Baez, a 53-year-old woman who has been living at the facility for several years.

"When she sees me, she gives me a big hug," Chica said. "She used to be isolated and depressed."

Baez, who is from the Dominican Republic, is feeling more at home at Alameda now that she has relocated to the fifth floor, which has been transformed to serve the Latino population.

"I'm happy about it," Baez said in Spanish,

which Chica translated. "I'm very excited because we have an entertainer that's coming once a week, and he sings Spanish music."

Yesterday afternoon, a grand opening was held in the unit that officially opened last month, bringing together new and existing Latino residents at the long-term and subacute care facility. The fifth floor now houses 46 residents, with a 52-resident capacity.

"Careful research, strong input from our Hispanic staff members and attending physicians has helped us address the cultural needs of the Hispanic population," said

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Photos by JOE McLAUGHLIN/Staff photographer

Latino music kicked off the opening of the fifth floor of the Alameda Center for Rehabilitation and Care yesterday where Latino culture and cuisine are the rule. Patient Pedro Vargas joined with the band making Latino music for the occasion, above. Patient Shantaben Patel prays before a donated shrine on the recently open Indian floor at the center, left.

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Sidney Greenberger, CEO of Garden State Healthcare Group, which took over management of Alameda in August 2004. "Our program includes Hispanic food and religious services, Hispanic doctors and staff, cultural activities, decor, television, music and newspapers." Activities held throughout Alameda's six-floor building (formerly the Perth Amboy Nursing Home), such as Bingo and dominoes, are conducted in Spanish.

"This enhanced level of care accelerates recovery and hastens rehabilitation," said Michael Neiman, Alameda's administrator.

Neiman's words have already proved true, as seen on the third floor, which was dedicated to the Indian community in July.

"Every person gained more than 5 pounds in the 16 weeks since our program started," said Mukund Thakar, director of the Indian services program. Pursopam Patel, 71, has gained 7 pounds in that time frame.

"I like it here," Patel said. "It is my sweet home."

During the recent Diwali celebration, Patel went to stay with his son in Queens, N.Y. He

came back to Alameda three days early.

"He doesn't want to go anywhere, just here," Thakar said, as Patel listened. "He called every day to us."

Throughout his career, Thakar has observed people living in such facilities to be happier and healthier when immersed in their own culture.

"I worked in different nursing homes," Thakar said. "There, the people were so depressed because they didn't know the language."

Another problem is that older folks often won't eat if they can't have their native foods, Thakar said.

Yesterday's menu on the Indian floor featured a buffet variety of items including Dal, which is like a pea soup, and Roti, a flat, whole wheat bread.

Like the Latino section, the Indian unit offers culturally specific activities, media outlets and religious services.

Residents pray in front of an elegant, in-house shrine that was donated by a family member of a resident. Thakar's wife, Rame, who is a patient coordinator, holds a holy book reading every day between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m.

Residents have come from across the nation and London to Alameda's specialized facility, Thakar said. He currently has 118 inquiries for admission and expects the floor to reach its 52-bed capacity by year's end.

Garden State Healthcare Group has committed approximately \$1.5 million to rehabilitate the 250-bed, 31-year-old facility and has also received a \$1.2 million state grant to refurbish the building's exterior, said spokeswoman Renee Pruzansky. The company has also bumped up Alameda's staff by about 40 percent.

