

A home of their own

Central Jersey care facility provides the Indian touch

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Hillsborough resident Mahesh Varia came to the U.S. from India 40 years ago. His mother lived with him for 25 years. Now, she has arthritis and Alzheimer's.

"You are torn between keeping them in a nursing home and giving them good care at home," Varia said. "But it is difficult to take care of her, with her condition, our jobs and our children."

Varia's solution

On a recent sunny afternoon, Varia's mom sat in a wheelchair observing the table across the room. The big smiley yellow ball bounces from one end of a long table to the other as stretched hands push it along. The men and women, all older than 65, are doing their afternoon exercises. Afterwards, tea will be served, Indian-style, that is.

The Alameda Center in Perth Amboy is a rehabilitation and care facility. Its uniqueness comes in the fact that it devotes one entire floor to the Hispanic community and another floor entirely to immigrants from India.

"We believe that being in a culturally adapted environment promotes physical and emotional well being. It is with that concept in mind that we created our Indian program," said Sidney Greenberger, chief executive officer for Alameda's corporate office, Garden State Healthcare Group.

A new home away from home

The third floor of the six-floor facility has about 37 Indian patients, of which 25 are women. Started last July with the help of Program Director Mukund Thakar and his wife, Assistant Program Director Rama, the program has attracted many families looking for a care facility



One of the keys to good care in a nursing facility is that the patients feel comfortable and at home. The third floor of the Alameda Center in Perth Amboy is devoted to the needs of elderly Indian immigrants. It is believed to be the only such facility in North America. The staff on the Indian floor at Alameda Center speak regional Indian languages. The residents have access to Indian doctors and nurses, as well as Indian-language newspapers and television.

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like Alameda. Thakar says he gets sometimes about 50 to 60 phone calls a day from all over the country inquiring about Alameda's Indian-based service and care for their loved ones.

"My aim is to provide quality care while making their stay here as natural and as comfortable as they would be if they were home," Thakar said. "Our residents maintain a connection with their former lifestyle and culture."

A personal mission to keep elders active

For the Thakars, it's a personal quest. They are instrumental in providing a home away from home at Alameda.

"This is a mission, not a job," Thakar said. "In my culture, our parents are like gods. I didn't get to serve my father as I wanted, but now I am serving 37 parents in his place. This is an obligation, a community service for me."

Thakar, who was a certified nursing assistant for more than 20 years with Alameda, created a program for the facility's Indian floor with his wife.

The staff reflects the community's needs for language and interaction. Residents like 89 year-old Naralal Parikh, 102 year-old teacher Jagannath Trivedi and 91 year-old Swarnalata Agarwal all say the same thing. They like Alameda because they can communicate with fellow patients, as well as the staff, and that they like to eat the vegetarian food that is prepared especially for the Indian patients.

They are alert and clear in their thinking. They smile, talk and have some activity that keeps them occupied. Parikh keeps a daily journal, while Agarwal, a published author with a doctorate in Hindi, reads and writes regularly.

The facility, which Garden State Health Group believes to be the only one of its kind that caters to the Indian community in North America, offers Indian doctors and staff, religious service, cultural activities, food and entertainment in regional Indian languages.

"We have had patients who come here unresponsive and within a few months, they are talking to the other residents, eating and gaining weight," said Renee Pruzansky, corporate director of marketing and public relations for Garden State Healthcare Group. "When we address their mental, social and physical well-being, the patients do well."