



William R. Cunitz, president
and CEO of Pilgrim Place

PHOTO BY JENNIFER CAPPUCCIO MAHER

A home within the home

Pilgrim Place developing new strategies for long-term care

'Our goal is to recreate the nursing home as several households where small groups of residents live, and it feels more like home.'

By AMY BENTLEY

FOR YEARS, the major complaint about nursing homes and long-term care facilities has been they are more like hospital wards than homes — places where no one wants to stay while recuperating or live later in life.

At Pilgrim Place, a Claremont retirement community, a new strategy to put residents more in control of their daily lives is being developed for its long-term nursing facility.

“Our goal is to recreate the nursing home as several households where small groups of residents live, and it feels more like home. There will be a living room, a dining room

and a kitchen in each household, and the staff will be dedicated to each household,” said William R. Cunitz, president and CEO of Pilgrim Place.

Creating this household model with its corresponding sense of community will mean a dramatic change in how decisions are made for residents, he says.

Currently, most nursing homes are run from the top down, with the staff making the rules and the residents at the bottom of the hierarchy and at the mercy of a schedule designed to get things done, Cunitz says.

But the orientation toward getting things done sometimes runs counter to how residents want to live, he adds.

Under the new model, residents would decide daily living issues, such as when meals are served, and leadership would be shared with a staff that is trained to handle tasks ranging from nursing care to housekeeping.

“We know that there is a better way of taking care of people, and we are committed to making it happen,” said Sue Likens, Pilgrim Place marketing director.

While Pilgrim Place’s 32-acre campus is primarily for retirees from religious and non-profit careers, the nursing facility is open to anyone. It provides long-term and short-term care as well as rehabilitative services and is licensed for up to 68 residents.

Pilgrim Place is in the midst of a \$26 million project that will add 18 new two-bedroom/two-bathroom assisted living and independent living apartments; all will meet the highest standards of energy-efficient, eco-friendly construction.

The campus already has 42 assisted-living apartments as well as individual homes, duplexes and community facilities including a dining room, library, arts studio, exercise room and aquatic center.

The upgrade project includes an exercise center and a newly renovated Resident Activity Center, and is scheduled for completion this spring.

The skilled nursing facility at Pilgrim Place, called the Health Services Center, is targeted for the biggest changes, Cunitz says.

Pilgrim Place has been working for several months with a consultant, Milwaukee-based Action Pact Inc., which provides training and education to help senior communities and nursing homes become resident-directed.

Pilgrim Place also has hired an architect to help transform the center, built in 1980, to the household model.

Pilgrim Place is expected to take about a year and a half to make the transformation, with a steering team at the helm and action teams to develop and implement specific changes.

Culture change wish list

- Choose the decor in their rooms,
- Have their own comfortable chair and possessions,
- Decide when they want to bathe,
- Select what and when they want to eat, and
- Decide whether they want to stay up late or sleep in.

Along the way, Cunitz is learning all he can about culture change and what other senior-care facilities nationwide have done to make things better.

In late September, he attended a meeting in Milwaukee with representatives of retirement communities from all over the United States that are developing, or have developed, a household model for long-term care. He wanted to hear about the success and failures.

The meeting was sponsored by the non-profit Association of Households International, which is not related to Action Pact but also advocates changes to elder-directed care.

Specifics at Pilgrim Place have yet to be ironed out, but Likens says she is on a panel that recently completed a “culture change wish list” which spelled out examples of changes that could be made.

A facility also could create a home-like environment by setting up a central kitchen where residents could gather to chat and grab a snack from the fridge, she says.

The staff and residents at Pilgrim Place want the changes, Likens says, and many residents have read “Old Age in a New Age: The Promise of Transformative Nursing Homes.” The book was published in 2007, and supports the goals of Action Pact and Pilgrim Place.

In the book, author Beth Baker discusses how culture change leaders are tearing up everything from nursing home floor plans and menus to schedules and rules to give seniors a higher quality of life.

“This new way of caring for the elderly will benefit the community at large,” Likens said. “We hope we will be a model and be leaders for others in what we are doing.”

Learn more at www.actionpact.com and www.pilgrimplace.org.

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