



Cappella LIVING SOLUTIONS



Is Hospitality the Answer for Senior Living?

A Cappella Living Solutions
White Paper
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Introduction

Hospitality has become a very popular topic in the senior living field. Communities featuring bistros and beer taps and the amenities of a fine hotel are popping up all around the country. Hospitality is seen as an approach that can attract baby boomers and eliminate the institutional feel that exists in many traditional communities. Indeed, the hospitality model has brought us more freedom and choice in services, higher quality dining experiences and less institutional designs. However, simply applying the concepts and operational structures of a hotel or resort without considering the significant differences inherent in senior living can backfire by undermining purpose and a sense of community. Senior living settings require a special approach – a blend of hospitality, community building, and a focus on supporting meaningful purpose.

It's not a hotel

As we work to transform communities to become more appealing to current and future prospects, it can be tempting to simply layer the service-rich offerings of a hotel or resort over the operations of a senior living community. However, this narrow approach misses some of the key differences between a hotel and a community living setting for older adults.

Hotels and resorts provide experiences away from home and as a respite from the normalcy of day-to-day life. Conversely, senior living communities are home to the people who live there. Many people thoroughly enjoy a stay in a five star hotel. But who would really want to live in a hotel permanently?

What hotels and resorts lack, and what is desperately needed in senior living environments, is an inclusive community culture with opportunities for meaningful purpose. As environmental gerontologist and Ibasho founder, Emi Kiyota, has said, “Elders living in grass huts in Africa with children at their feet are often happier than people in assisted living homes with a chandelier over their heads.”

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- Emi Kiyota, Ibasho



Rather than thinking of our communities as resorts or hotels, we may be better served if we think of them as small towns or villages – comprised of complex social systems with a core structure of interdependence – where each individual understands that they are a part of the whole and have a vital role in creating a thriving, successful community.

People need to belong

Human beings, no matter what their age, have a basic need to belong and to be part of something (Maslow 1943). Unfortunately, as people age, many find their opportunities for social engagement dwindle. Their support systems get smaller as friends and neighbors pass away or move, or as they begin to experience physical or cognitive challenges that limit their ability to be engaged with the outside community. Put simply, our worlds often begin to shrink as we age.

As this happens, isolation and loneliness may creep in – which has been shown to be extremely dangerous. Isolation is as deadly as smoking, more deadly than obesity, doubles the risk of dementia, shortens life spans, and increases the likelihood of re-hospitalization (Holt-Lunstad et. al. 2010; Wilson et al. 2007; Misty et al. 2001). This presents a dangerous list of risk factors for the older adult population.

Some older adults recognize this danger and seek out communal living in a retirement community. Unfortunately, simply being in proximity to other people does not guarantee social engagement.

A recent study conducted at a life plan community (also known as a continuing care retirement community) found that 25 percent of residents residing in independent living identified themselves as socially isolated.

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Senior living settings are complex environments. Often, older adults are facing their own fears of aging and aging-related debilities. While ageism is rampant throughout our society, some communities have found that ageism is even more pronounced among the older population, a theory that makes sense when considering the definition of ageism coined by psychologist Todd D. Nelson that explains that ageism is “prejudice against our feared future self” (2005).



This “fear” Nelson describes results in heightened social comparisons against negative aging stereotypes. Older adults who are fearful of losing cognitive or physical abilities are using the health of those around them to determine their own relative health, which leads to downward contrast comparisons (Loeckenhoff 2016). These are the kind of ageist statements like “At least I’m not blind like Mary,” or “I don’t belong here, these people are old.” While these ageist statements are serving as a coping mechanism for the healthier adults, if left unchecked, the culture of a senior living community can become fraught with cliques and bullying. Those living with physical or cognitive challenges can be marginalized and ostracized by their healthier or more independent neighbors. Even when individuals are not the recipients of overt bullying or ostracism, they may begin to self-isolate to avoid social rejection.

Becoming community builders

Creating a senior living community requires more than a beautiful building design and appealing amenities. It’s critical that we also become skilled community builders, committed to creating environments where people belong and where individuals are honored, no matter what challenges they may be living with.

This requires intention and an unwavering commitment to creating inclusivity and a true community. It may also necessitate revising the old customer service adage from ‘the customer is always right’ to ‘the customer is always right except when there is harm being done to others’. If the actions of a resident are negatively impacting the culture or other individuals, we have an obligation to address the situation through honest conversations and education.

Clermont Park: a case study

Clermont Park Retirement Community in Denver, CO, discovered the need to create new norms and expectations when beginning to create an inclusive culture. Education was the first step.

Residents and team members learned about the damage that is done when people are marginalized and ostracized. A new norm was introduced in which ageism and ableism (prejudice against people living with physical or cognitive challenges) were no more acceptable than racism or sexism. Slowly, the culture



began to shift as residents realized that their actions were not aligned with the values they held. Residents from all areas of the community, and with differing cognitive and physical abilities, came together as one to celebrate that unity. Residents now own and maintain that culture, educating others if they hear or see any statements or behaviors that minimize the value of another person.

As the community continued bringing together people living with different challenges and at different points in their lives, residents and team members realized that they also needed to address the way in which they handled the death of a resident. In the past, as in many communities, death was hidden away, with the undertaker removing the resident quietly so as not to upset others. Once the community became open to discussing death, they realized they couldn't honor the richness of life without properly addressing the death and loss of a friend or neighbor.

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The community developed personalized and highly meaningful rituals such as processions of residents, family and team members that accompany the mortician through the front doors when a deceased resident is taken out of the building.

While the goal of a resort or hotel is to create a consistently positive and happy experience, real life happens in a senior living community. People get sick and people die. When we try to sanitize and hide the unpleasant or frightening aspects of growing older, we diminish the wholeness of life. We must encourage the healthy development of meaningful rituals that accompany life's difficult times.

To some, this raw and honest approach might seem frightening. But Clermont Park has found that people are drawn to this culture, because the fear that sparks ageism – that we will lose our abilities and be forgotten about – is removed when everyone is valued and accepted. In addition, the community is highly marketable, attracting the coveted “young and active” senior along with a more traditional prospect, and maintains a consistent community occupancy level of over 98 per cent.



Blurring the lines

Blurring the lines between team members and residents is another powerful step in developing a healthy community. While a hotel or resort structure is organized with clearly defined lines between staff and guests and often forbids fraternization between the groups, many innovative senior living organizations have recognized that one of the most powerful opportunities for community building – including promoting intergenerational relationships – is right under their noses. They’ve realized that a truly engaged community requires removing the walls between staff and residents. Interaction is encouraged by designing dining spaces, fitness centers and other amenities to be enjoyed by residents and team members alike.

We must also work at shifting our culture to encourage authentic relationships rather than a more surface-level customer service approach. Training programs that encourage staff to think of themselves as “cast members” or “on stage” may work well in a resort, but senior living requires a different approach. In an environment where residents and family members experience highly emotional life-altering events such as illness and death, some organizations have found that being able to interact and communicate with a real human being, one who is encouraged to bring their true self to the job, brings the opportunity for genuine support and understanding.

When “Doing for” Can Cause Harm

In addition to bringing a focus on community building, we must also strive to create and support opportunities for purpose. Having meaning and a “reason for being” is a basic human need (Maslow 1943).

Customer service, no matter how excellent, can actually undermine and disempower those we are trying to serve by focusing solely on “doing for” or “creating experiences for” people rather than giving them an opportunity to do for themselves and create their own experiences.

In addition to encouraging learned helplessness among residents, we may also be undermining our own efforts to change the view of senior living in the marketplace. One of the main fears of aging, and of moving to a senior living community, is the potential loss of independence (Prince and Butler 2007).



When we sell a “worry-free” lifestyle and a vision of older adults sitting back without a care in the world, we may be unwittingly reinforcing these fears. We may also be impacting the way society views older adults. The aging of the baby boomer population has brought these views to the forefront. The population shift is called a “silver tsunami” - suggesting that a large older population is a disaster, and reinforcing prescriptive age stereotypes where older adults shouldn’t be using up scarce healthcare resources or keeping jobs from younger millennials. The prevalence of these terms reinforces the idea that older adults no longer have purpose in our society.

We must focus on creating communities that challenge this pervasive thinking by introducing the concept of older adults being a large and untapped wealth of knowledge and human capital - rather than a burden and a drain on society.

The power of purpose

By focusing on older adults as people who still have purpose and meaning, we will do more than improve the culture in our communities. Research indicates that we will also improve overall health and wellbeing (Rush University Medical Center, 2009).

Meaningful purpose has been shown to reduce the risk of developing mild cognitive impairment and Alzheimer’s disease, increase longevity and protect against heart disease (Boyle et al. 2010).

The opportunities for cultivating purpose and meaning start at the beginning of a new community’s development. Some providers have found that their most vibrant communities are created during the design process. The typical desire to plan spaces according to how designers think residents will live are eschewed in favor of providing a “blank canvas” of flexible common and outdoor spaces that can evolve into what the residents and team members want from their community.

Providing a “blank canvas” of flexible common and outdoor spaces that can evolve into what the residents and team members want from their community.

Holly Creek: a case study

Holly Creek, a life plan (or continuing care retirement) community in Denver, learned this powerful lesson after the community was designed and opened. A massage room had been a key part of the lifestyle design for the community, but once the community opened, it was rarely used. Rather than trying to force an amenity that residents weren't excited about, leadership was open to other opportunities for the space. When a resident moved in who used to run a radio station, he started talking about the possibilities for creating a station at the community. Momentum and support for the concept grew and that massage room is now home to HCRK, a completely resident run radio station that is a main communication venue and a very unique selling point of the community.

In addition to promoting resident decision-making in the use of common area spaces, Holly Creek leadership encourages residents to be involved in operational problem solving. When the community experienced struggles with team member retention, leadership noticed an interesting trend in their analysis of team member satisfaction and exit surveys. Time and time again, when asked, "What do you value most about your job?" team members responded with, "The residents."

The Holly Creek Executive Director, Jayne Keller, described the realization as a light bulb going off: residents were one of their most powerful retention tools. Residents and team members came together and created what is now called the "Keepers Committee," a group that designs and implements retention strategies such as handwritten appreciation notes to team members, parties, and other events. While this committee is still in its infancy, leadership anticipates an initial improvement in team member retention of 12 percent.

A new approach

Hospitality-based services and amenities are essential to the success of senior living communities, but are just a small piece of the intricate operations that encourage the aging population to thrive and stay healthy in old age. As outlined in Table 1 below, we must focus on a new and adapted approach that also includes the concepts of community building and creating opportunities for meaningful purpose. It is by using this approach that we can create environments that embody the true meaning of "community" cultures where older adults live well and thrive.

Table: A new approach

Traditional Approach	New Approach
Doing for, caring for	Doing with, supporting, care, partnering
Elders as recipients of services and care	Person-directed services, active and meaningful role in society
Cast members, on stage, separate from residents	Authentic relationships
Segregation of residents	Inclusive culture
Spaces designed for specific purposes	Flexible spaces, creating the “canvas”
Paternalism	Empowerment
Aging = limitation and decline	Aging = possibilities and growth

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Our passion is to inspire a world of possibilities in senior living through experienced leadership and strategic insight that ignites a culture of success and transforms the way the world views aging



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