

Practitioner Forum

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Culture Transformation in Action

The Experience of One VA Community Living Center

Culture change or transformation is a wonderful new movement that seeks to replace an institutional approach to long-term care with an individualized and resident-focused approach. According to the National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform, this paradigm shift "involves rethinking values and practices of a nursing home from top to bottom, inside and out."¹ An important component of culture transformation is the creation of a home-like atmosphere.

The VA is making a major effort to implement culture transformation. In April 2005, the department held a nursing home summit that included planning for culture transformation as one of its major goals.² To emphasize its new approach, the VHA acted in 2008 to formally change the name of its extended care units from "nursing home care units" to "community living centers" (CLCs).³

The CLC at VA Northern Indiana Health Care System (VANIHCS) in Marion has enthusiastically embarked on the journey of culture transformation. This CLC includes a total of 148 beds in five units: a special care dementia unit, a palliative and hospice care unit, a short-stay skilled care unit, and two geriatric-psychiatric units. Its

journey was initiated in 2006 through the Geriatrics and Extended Care Operations Committee of VANIHCS's parent network, VISN 11. VANIHCS participated in the committee's planning for culture transformation and aggressively implemented the resulting plan. Through such steps as providing more choices to residents, educating staff, redecorating the facility, and holding special events, the CLC has made great strides in transforming its culture.

The CLC's approach to culture transformation is an interdisciplinary and holistic one that depends upon interdisciplinary teams, each of which includes a provider, nurse, social worker, dietician, and recreation therapist. These teams assess the needs of residents and their family members, meet at least weekly to review plans of care, and work collaboratively to provide integrated services and care delivery. In addition, the CLC's approach depends upon contributions from our education, environment, nutrition and food, recreation activities, housekeeping and facility engineering, and social work services, as well as from residents and their family members.

CLC staff have replaced their former institutional approach to overseeing residents' sleeping, hygiene, and dining with an individualized approach that promotes choices. Staff gather information regarding each resident's lifestyle and usual living patterns and incorporate it into that individual's plan of care. Instead of conducting 6 AM rounds during which everyone is awakened, for example, our individualized approach allows

one resident to rise at 6 AM and another to rise at 9 AM.

Similarly, our food and nutrition service is actively involved in creating choices for each resident and planning for his or her special dietary needs. In addition to serving meals on individualized schedules, the service enables residents to choose daily from a variety of beverages, which are provided in a beverage cart, and popular snacks. Residents also may request special meals, such as fast food, pizza, birthday meals, or holiday meals, and they may ask to dine with their families on special occasions.

Initially, the CLC used a strategic plan to educate staff about cultural transformation. Its education initiatives included an eight-hour workshop with several learning modules for all nursing and interdisciplinary staff. The workshop was attended by more than 260 staff members over an 18-month period, and attendees were consistently complimentary about the experience in postworkshop evaluations. In addition, the CLC formed a Cultural Transformation Steering Committee and several ongoing work groups that reported to the committee. As staff empowerment is a key component of culture transformation, work group members were mostly front-line staff who worked in such areas as environment, dining, activities, family involvement, and education. We also gave a Cultural Transformation Contribution Award to a different staff member each month to recognize his or her outstanding efforts.

Providing the CLC with the physical look of a home has been a large part of our culture transformation.

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Traditionally, nursing homes have been built for economy of scale and have included large spaces—such as long corridors and cavernous dining rooms—that pose difficulties for people with memory loss.⁴ In contrast, the CLC has adjusted its decor to minimize the corridor and large-room effect and create a more comfortable and homey atmosphere. Its units now feature faux fireplaces, kitchenettes, and courtyard flower and vegetable beds, along with such comfortable and inviting furniture as recliner chairs, overstuffed couches, and decorative floor lamps. This decor eases the transition for new residents and their families from their home to our home. Furthermore, the murals in our palliative and hospice care unit—which picture such “homes away from home” as a log cabin, a country farmhouse, and a cottage by the sea—create an uplifting atmosphere in each room. And our palliative care team has created a peaceful, quiet, and comfortable family room that provides privacy for palliative care residents and their families during their vigil.

The addition of satellite television was another of our culture transformation initiatives. Since sports are an important part of most of our residents’ lives, we introduced satellite television to give them access to a wider variety of televised sporting events. Rather than watching a television that receives four channels while sitting on institutional looking furniture, as is common in many nursing homes, our residents now are able to choose from among a large number of televised games and races while lounging in comfortable recliners beside a crackling faux fireplace and eating a favorite snack.

Our center brings variety and excitement to the lives of residents through such special events as a home-cooked breakfast served on one Saturday of each month. The break-

fasts are provided in the CLC’s dining room by the Altrusa Club of Marion, a local group of volunteers. These volunteers cook eggs to order, make fresh toast, offer choices of sausage, provide fresh fruits, and serve food from the skillet to the table—hot, fresh, and individualized. The event helps to create a favorable home atmosphere for the residents, who can start the day by socializing with their peers and the volunteers amid delicious aromas.

Another of our special events was the October 2007 fall carnival, which came about at a resident’s suggestion. The carnival featured clowns, colorful sights, festive sounds, wonderful aromas, delicious tastes, and fun activities for residents and their families. We served foot-long hot dogs, cotton candy, elephant ears, popcorn, and snow cones to enhance residents’ memories of carnivals from their youth.

The Super Bowl is an annual occasion for two special events that residents enjoy. Beforehand, the CLC holds huge “pep rallies,” during which residents, their families and friends, and staff gather to join in the fun. The rallies typically provoke animated conversations, opinionated speculations, and hopeful anticipations. And on the day of the big game, we hold a fantastic “tailgate” party with great snacks such as bratwurst, root beer floats, and submarine sandwiches.

Our Exchange Club is the source of special occasions enjoyed by residents in the CLC’s special dementia care unit. Through the club, veterans in the VANIHCs’s substance abuse treatment program (SATP) are matched to “buddy” veterans with dementia, and the pairs of buddies spend about 50 minutes engaging in conversation, games, music, or crafts each week. Both the unit residents and the SATP veterans have expressed great enthusiasm for the Exchange Club, with the residents eagerly question-

ing therapists about future visits with their buddies.⁵

Although our CLC’s culture transformation has involved relatively small changes in atmosphere, attitude, and environment, these changes have provided our residents with access to choices and experiences that adults living independently take for granted. Culture transformation also has gone a long way toward establishing the CLC as a home, which has made a tremendous difference in residents’ lives. After all, home is where the heart is! ●

Author disclosures

The authors report no actual or potential conflicts of interest with regard to this column.

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