Seeking Wellness

For seniors today, it’s more than just bridge and bingo.

Michelle Y. Blanc

As you enter the vestibule of the open, sunlit facility, you hardly notice the mellifluous sound of classical music floating softly through the air. Wafting from the culinary kitchen is the invigorating aroma of recently brewed gourmet coffee, prepared and refreshed throughout the day for clients and provided free of charge. Nearby, in the multipurpose area, a group of 20 or so men and women sit on floor mats cross-legged, with their hands in a prayer pose, partaking in the meditative pleasures of yoga. As you move through the facility, you take note of the center’s activity board for the week: aromatherapy, tai chi, soy culinary arts workshop, and pilates. Sounds like you’ve entered a rather chic wellness facility, right? No, you are visiting the Bethesda Senior Source, a hospital-based health and wellness center for adults 55 and older. A senior center, you say? Yes, but not your ordinary senior center.

Since 1997, the Bethesda Senior Source, and other centers like it, have offered a wide array of programming focused on active older adults, incorporating traditional senior wellness activities, like bridge and crafts, with nontraditional senior programming such as financial management and culinary arts. This award-winning “drop in” health and wellness center is a public–private partnership between Holy Cross Hospital and the Montgomery County Maryland Government, and it is located just outside Washington, DC, in the affluent suburb of Bethesda, MD. The average user is 65 years old and is often well traveled and well educated, and therefore demands high-quality, senior-focused health and wellness programming. This particular center does not include a congregate meal site or housing, which are found at most traditional senior centers. As with college classes, participants register for an activity in advance (some free, and some for a nominal fee), drop in for a class, and later leave the grounds if they wish. This unique center is indicative of the future for health and wellness programming for older adults.

Breaking tradition is being evidenced not only in the senior center setting but also in senior housing. Stephanie Paige is the executive director of Jubilee Cove, a nontraditional assisted-living facility located in Bowie, MD. Stephanie and her family, who are co-owners, consider it to be not just a facility but also a home. Instead of the sterile setting of the traditional assisted-living facility, this home provides a safe environment, meals, and activities, but the family is proudest of the companionship they provide. “While we provide assisted-living services to seniors who have declined in their ability to perform tasks of personal and daily living, we also welcome active seniors who desire community living with daily social interaction,” says Paige.

Activity programming in today’s senior centers and senior living communities is vastly different from that in the past. For some seniors, the mere idea of a senior center or senior housing conjures up images of wheelchairs, bedsores, black-and-white televisions, and bland meals. Nursing homes of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were mostly nonprofits or associated with religious institutions, and often were repurposed hospital buildings. They were connected by the levels of services they offered, including rehabilitation, treatment of Alzheimer’s disease, long-term care, and hospice. Over several decades, and even now, conventional nursing homes have had a stigma attached in which the residents are often mistreated, underfed, and neglected. According to a recent Gannett News Service analysis of federal inspection and complaint investigation reports, of 16,437 Medicare- and Medicaid-certified nursing homes nationwide, only 314, which are fewer than 2%, have been violation-free for the past four years.

With over 1.5 million elderly and dependent adults now living in nursing homes throughout the country, abuse and neglect have become prevalent. Even with facilities like the Bethesda Senior Source, which offers first-rate activities for seniors, and Jubilee Cove, which has an established record and provides supreme care, far too many centers subject helpless residents to needless suffering and even death. Nursing-home residents are often dependent on the staff for most of their needs, such as food, water, medicine, toileting, grooming, stimulation, and, sadly, turning. The unfortunate reality is that many people in nursing homes in the past and even today are starved, dehydrated, overmedicated, and suffer from bedsores. They are often isolated, ignored, and deprived of social contact and stimulation. A common problem is that caregivers are often overworked and underpaid, which can result in rude and abusive treatment of vulnerable residents.

Vital Aging Concept

According to the World Health Organization, health is defined as “the state of
Making a Choice

How do you choose the right facility for yourself or a loved one? The first thing you should look at is the atmosphere. What types of meals are offered by the facility? Consider nutrition, choice, appearance, variety, and taste. Are special meals available for dietary restrictions? Does a dietician approve resident meal plans?

Another important question is the facility’s visiting hours. What types of accommodations are available for visitors? Are there any restrictions on having guests? How clean is the facility in reference to appearance and odor? What are the general attitude and appearance of the residents and staff? How often and in what manner does the staff interact with the residents? Does the staff recognize all of the residents? Are members of the staff friendly toward the residents?

Regarding activities, is socialization encouraged and promoted? What are the extent, range, and frequency of planned activities? Are there a lot of opportunities for transportation? How flexible is a resident’s daily schedule? How much independence is allowed? Are the facility and its administrator licensed by the state? As far as amenities go, are exercise facilities available to the residents? Do the units have a telephone and television? How is billing handled? Is there a kitchen with a sink and refrigerator in the unit? Are religious facilities available?

Another important factor in choosing the right facility is the financial aspect. What is the monthly cost of the facility? What services are included in the monthly cost? What services have to be paid for separately? What kinds of opportunities are available for a resident to receive further care as a condition or problem requires? What happens if you are unable to pay for services? As far as safety, are intercoms installed in each room? Is there a 24-hour emergency response system accessible from each unit? Is there proper lighting, handrails, emergency pull-cords, and door alarms? How extensive is the fire system? Are there lockable doors for each unit? How close is the nearest hospital? Is a doctor or pharmacy on-site? How many staff members are on duty for each shift at the facility?

These responses are evidence of the changing needs and attitudes of older adults today compared with just one generation ago. As baby boomers age (the leading edge of the baby boom generation is approaching 60), the demand for high-quality, accessible, and cutting-edge activities will increase. Few will be the days of the more traditional center with congregate meals and chair exercise classes. Expanded programs with extended hours that include evenings and weekends to accommodate the older adult still in the workforce will be more common. Activities will revolve around research-based programming that provides the most up-to-date information about disease management and prevention, health promotion, and strategies for modifying certain health behaviors like smoking cessation and weight loss. Additionally, programs will be developed based on outcome measurements that recognize the short, intermediate, and long-term effects of those individuals participating in community-based health and wellness programs.

The big challenge for health educators and coordinators of senior wellness programs will be to seamlessly integrate the contemporary health and wellness curriculum demanded by the baby boomer set with programming targeted to the more frail, health-challenged older adult.

Undoubtedly, as one gets older, certain diseases and conditions will creep into the lives of even the most active, health-conscious older adult. Conditions like arthritis, osteoporosis, Alzheimer’s disease, and heart disease will continue to be relevant for the older adult population, and it will be imperative to address the needs of individuals seeking information about the management or prevention of those and other diseases. Senior-center program coordinators must be savvy and creative enough to develop programs and activities that acknowledge yet do not overemphasize the challenges of growing older. Concurrently, they must take into account health issues that are more prevalent in the older adult community and develop high-quality health education programs accordingly. Health and wellness programs of the future will work to creatively mix the traditional with the nontraditional, forming effective health and wellness programming well suited for individuals in the entire spectrum of aging.

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