

Is It Time for R & R?

Rethinking and repositioning your CCRC.

by Dianne Molvig

For continuing care retirement communities (CCRCs), repositioning is a familiar and necessary process that occurs at least once per generation. For a not-for-profit CCRC, however, repositioning isn't merely a financial and marketing realignment tied to a construction project. Instead, it offers a chance to re-establish and update its mission and learn to serve new generations of seniors.

Here is a look at a few CCRCs that incorporated fresh thinking into their repositionings:

- A “do-it-yourself” redevelopment that maintained its commitment to serving middle-class people.
- Engaging residents by giving them a part in the planning and execution of change.
- Changing from a “caretaker” orientation to one that increases residents’ choices and helps them pursue long-forgotten dreams.
- Building a new community in an urban area and working to meld with the surrounding community.
- Increasing the organization’s outreach and service offerings to non-residents.

Perhaps fewer people call to ask for tours these days. Some who do visit may inquire about services and amenities you don't offer. You've also seen senior living options multiply in your community, while seniors grow in numbers and have increasingly divergent backgrounds, interests, needs and preferences for how to live.

These are just some of the indicators that the time is right to rethink or reposition your organization.

“Typically, repositioning is necessary when an organization isn't seeing the outcomes it would like,” says DeWayne McMullin, president of New Life Management & Development, La Canada, Calif. “The facility is just not as competitive or desirable as others in the market area, so occupancy falls off.”

Solutions are wide-ranging, McMullin notes, including everything from giving your facility a physical facelift to redesigning your activities to better fit residents’ needs and interests to revising your resident contract to be more consumer-friendly, such as changing refund policies.

Then there's “repositioning from within,” McMullin adds. “A big part of that is changing the mindset of employees so they're focused on accommodating and enabling the people they serve, rather than just nurturing and caring.”

The next repositioning strategy to consider is to reach out into surrounding neighborhoods and communities, suggests Beverly Brandon, vice president of senior living design and research at Rees Associates, Atlanta, Ga.

“Seniors today are looking for more choices,” she points out. “Many don't

want to move into a retirement community.” Or they can't afford to do so, she adds, because their retirement nest eggs have dwindled. Brandon feels organizations can enhance their mission by offering home health care and other community-based services to seniors.

“The idea of spreading out beyond your walls is extremely important,” Brandon says. “It makes sense strategically. People will see that you know what's going on locally in senior services. You become the senior resource in your region.”

Giving seniors more options in services and how or where they use them is one key thrust of repositioning for the future, agrees Elizabeth Bartlett-Flury, director of clinical integration and aging strategy for Johns Hopkins Health System, Baltimore, Md. “To me, to reposition is to figure out how to minimize your real estate and maximize your services,” she says.

“I believe the answer to becoming market relevant today, in the 21st century,” she explains, “is to put the senior at the center of his or her own universe.”

But that entails more than delivering traditional services to seniors, in Bartlett-Flury's view. She believes seniors also need more opportunities to give to others by sharing their experiences and knowledge in meaningful ways. Organizations could reposition themselves to be facilitators in that regard, helping seniors “to feel relevant,” she says, “while living in their own idea of home and community.”

Do-It-Yourself Redevelopment

The Beatitudes Campus was one of the first full-continuum providers in the country when it was built in Phoe-

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nix, Ariz., 40 years ago, according to Peggy Mullan, president and CEO. “But programs and buildings had become stagnant,” she says. “Repositioning was right for us because it was a wholesale review of how we lived. We needed much more than a renovation.”

The objective was to change buildings and programs and to create a better distribution in the numbers of people in each level of care. The latter would help the facility succeed “both programmatically and financially,” Mullan explains, “in a very different environment from the one in which it was built.”

But in the process, the board and management were determined to stay true to a key Beatitudes’ mission: serving the middle class. They felt that required rejecting the typical development formula.

“It’s a cookie-cutter approach: Put up high-end, let it earn money for you, build up cash and worry about your mission down the road,” Mullan explains. “We didn’t want to do that. We would have outpriced the folks we’re dedicated to serving. So we built our own internal team” to steer redevelopment.

Part of what made that possible, she adds, was hiring new executive talent, including a chief financial officer, an operations manager and a marketing director. “We also made effective use of outside consultants when we needed to,” Mullan says, “but we kept control internally.”

She credits the board for “having the courage to take off the blinders,” she says, in recognizing the need for physical and program changes. And she praises residents for being resilient as they endured disruptions. “We had so many breakages of old infrastructure,” she recalls, “that

we started calling them water features. We tried to use humor.” Massive communication efforts with residents were critical, Mullan emphasizes. Only two people chose to move out during the redevelopment.



The Beatitudes Campus

Beatitudes Campus resident Mary Cook (foreground) shops with help from fellow resident and volunteer Ann Johnson in the gift shop in the organization’s new “town plaza” that also features dining areas, a beauty salon, barbershop, gym and educational space. The organization’s repositioning aimed at providing more up-to-date amenities and programming, while maintaining the mission to serve middle-class seniors.

Residents now enjoy gathering in the new “town plaza,” which has dining areas, a beauty salon, barbershop, gym and educational space. A recent belly dancing workshop, for instance, was a huge hit, and residents are asking for more, Mullan notes.

The Beatitudes Campus is now better equipped to serve today’s seniors. “We’re ready for them,” Mullan says. “The amenities are here. The program enhancements are here.”

Getting to “We Did It”

Since 1997, Cedar Community, West Bend, Wis., has gone through “tremendous rethinking,” says Jim Williams, director of operations. The organization has diversified and now offers independent living, assisted living, assisted living

for people with memory loss, a nursing home, rehabilitation services, subacute care, home health and hospice care and in-home supportive services.

One key aspect of the rethinking was the transformation of Cedar Ridge, a 23-year-old, 308-unit independent living apartment building. “A few years ago, we saw warning signs,” Williams says. “The competition was changing and increasing. Even the condo market was becoming competition for us.”

Besides updating individual apartments, the renovation of the 400,000-square-foot building focused on revamping the central common area. Williams describes the old layout as space for reception, a lobby, dining and “dark hallways that went to big activity rooms that were empty much of the time because activities come in spurts.”

The idea was to change this area into a hub of activity. Additions included a café, marketplace, bistro, business center, greenhouse/conservatory and meditation room. “We have many more spontaneous events happening in that area now,” Williams says. “It draws people in.”

Engaging residents in the project was a goal from day one. “Before hiring an architect or putting a shovel in the ground,” Williams reports, “we spent a lot of time educating residents about changes in the marketplace.”

That helped residents understand why Cedar Ridge needed rejuvenation. And the board’s decision that current residents wouldn’t pay for the project allayed their fears about being priced out. Residents also participated in making decisions all along as the project unfolded.

“One of the most important elements,” Williams emphasizes, “is to make sure

you include your constituents in the process.” As a couple of indicators of how invested Cedar Ridge residents felt in the project, he notes that users of the building’s woodworking shop made furniture and fixtures for the meditation room, and they built an aviary. “People felt a part of this,” Williams says.

One resident recently told Williams that at first she’d opposed the project. “She paused and added, ‘I’m so glad we did it,’” he recalls. “Not ‘you did it,’ but ‘we did it.’ That said a lot right there.”

“Repriorment” and Increasing Choice

Many older adults aren’t interested in retiring, but rather reprioritizing, says Mary Leary, president and CEO of Mather LifeWays, Evanston, Ill. “We developed a concept called ‘repriorment,’” she explains, “or pursuing pushed-aside but not forgotten passions and dreams.”

To support older adults in that endeavor, Mather LifeWays has taken on culture change as a key part of its repositioning. Employees focus on supporting older adults to “remain responsible for their actions and be as self-directive as possible,”



Mather LifeWays

This artist’s rendering of the new Mather North (left, to open in October) and Mather South (right, to open in 2011) shows how the CCRCs will be integrated into the urban environment of downtown Evanston. The new communities will reflect Mather LifeWays’ emphasis on helping residents stay self-directed and independent, and give them access to the busy urban environments many seniors want to live in.

Leary says. “We developed a declaration: ‘eliminate impossibilities.’ We try to eliminate restrictions and offer more choices for older adults and our employees.”

This mindset will prevail in The Mather North, phase one of a new CCRC opening this October. The Mather South will open across the street in 2011. These replace two older senior communities on the same sites. “We’re aiming to appeal to the next generation of older adults,” Leary says.

The Mather is situated between an historic district of single-family homes and a multi-family housing area, close to downtown Evanston. Getting approval from the city was an arduous 27-month process, Leary reports. Area residents raised concerns about the project being in their neighborhood.

And yet, Leary stresses, this is exactly the sort of location where many older adults want to live: right in the thick of things. Retail shops, Northwestern University and Lake Michigan beaches are close by.

The Mather will include a Mather’s—More than a Café, the fourth in the Chicago area, where people of all ages

gather for coffee, lunch or conversation, and those age 50-plus can take classes on subjects ranging from computers to yoga.

Some types of services available in the neighborhood won’t be duplicated inside The Mather, Leary explains. For example, there will be no on-site beauty salon, as several salons are just a block or two away. Residents can patronize area businesses and otherwise engage in the outside community.

The hope is also to bring the community into The Mather. Neighborhood residents have expressed interest in using The Mather’s fitness center and its 11th-floor rooftop restaurant, with a grand view of Lake Michigan and downtown Chicago. Says Leary, “We think neighbors are going to be clamoring to stop by.”

Creating Links

Connecting to older adults in the outside community is a major repositioning focus at Alexian Village of Milwaukee. “We’ve been looking at how we can create services that aren’t bricks-and-mortar bound,” says Gary Mohn, president and CEO.

He notes that at best, the traditional retirement community models touch five percent of the older adult market. The rest will never move into a facility. “If you look at this from a mission or ministry standpoint,” he says, “it’s something we’ve avoided or forgotten about. And from a business standpoint, it’s an opportunity.”

To serve more older adults, Alexian Village launched Club Alexian, where seniors from the surrounding community gather to socialize, attend authors’ book signings, enjoy con-

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certs, participate in wellness programs, join a Wii game club and more. The Club now has about 2,500 members and attracts roughly 500 new ones each month, according to Mohn.

Club Alexian activities happen in a building next door to Alexian Village, which the latter purchased. The Club occupies 5,000 of the building’s 40,000 square feet. Other entities, such as a clinic and a day care center, occupy the remaining space, helping to cover costs. Having the Club off-site is important, Mohn feels, so people don’t worry that they’re being lured in for an Alexian Village marketing pitch.

Club members get a card showing they belong, but pay no fee to join. A few events have a minimal charge. “I’m an advocate of card-carrying members,” Mohn explains. “If you carry a card in your pocket, you belong. Even if you’re not participating now, that card gives you some type of link.”

And that is precisely the point of Club Alexian: to reach out to older adults, especially those age 65 to 80, who are living at home. “They’re younger than our typical move-ins in the retirement community,” Mohn notes. “They’re active, golf-playing, yard-working individuals.”

Even so, many are isolated and lonely, he points out. Club Alexian is an antidote to that. Home-support services, such as chore services, also may be added in the future. Focus groups will help determine what sorts of additional programs Club members want.

While some would argue that a CCRC should strive to attract residents, not provide them services next door, Mohn doesn’t buy it. “Just because people don’t live in your facility,” he says, “doesn’t mean you shouldn’t create programs that connect them and give a sense of purpose to their lives.”

Dianne Molvig is a writer who lives in Madison, Wis.



Cedar Community

Volunteer mariachi Walt Thompson entertains residents during a Cinco de Mayo celebration in the new Bistro at Cedar Ridge Apartments. The building has had substantial renovation intended in part to promote more activity and spontaneous events, and in keeping with organization-wide rethinking. Residents were heavily engaged in the planning for the changes.

Resources

The Beatitudes Campus, Phoenix, Ariz.

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Alexian Village of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.

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