

After Hours Activities in ALFs: Enhancing Resident Quality of Life

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As general manager of The Bridge at Life Care Center in Columbia, TN, Tim Cook, Jr., likes to think of his residents as content vacationers on a cruise ship that never reaches port. “And that’s the way it needs to be,” Cook said. “Once you step on board, there should be something for you every hour of the day. I’ve had a lot of residents tell me they feel like they’re on vacation.”

Like many ALF managers, Cook understands the need for residents to have access to meaningful schedules after dinner as well as during the day—particularly events that mirror the home environment that many left behind. However, scheduling diversions that go into the evening hours is a challenge that most facility managers and activities directors have faced at one time or another. Fewer staff on-site in the evenings and residents who retire to their rooms after dinner sometimes limit the offerings that ALFs can provide. Nonetheless, more ALF managers are finding creative ways to meet those challenges; and their residents are reaping the health and social benefits.

For instance, the receptionist at Cook’s 70-unit facility is a ballroom dancer who has competed professionally. Twice a month, she organizes evening ballroom dancing ac-



tivities for residents. Theme nights also are popular. “If we’re having a Mexican dinner, we’ll decorate and bring in a mariachi band,” Cook said. “We’ve had Hawaiian luaus where everyone gets leis and we take pictures for a memory book.”

Sun Goes Down, Activities Heat Up

Cook, like other managers and activities directors interviewed, said evening events have been on the increase at their establishments. “It’s so important because our day doesn’t stop at 5 p.m. and theirs shouldn’t either,” he said, adding, “They were used to being occupied

before they came to our facility, so you’ve got to keep things happening. If not, they’ll let you know.”

“Increasingly, facilities are trying to create an environment much like the residents left behind; and that often includes activities such as card and board games at night,” said Paul J. Williams, Director of State Public Policy for the Assisted Living Federation of America (ALFA). “It’s traumatic enough for many of them to go into a new living situation. The more activities, the greater the familiarity to them—which manifests itself into a routine that seems like home.” Williams observed that most states mandate a

minimum number of hours of activity in facilities. However, many are going well above and beyond their state's requirements.

At ALFs throughout the country, impromptu evening gatherings for bridge, bingo, puzzles, or movies are common occurrences. These are activities that residents often initiate.

Internal and External Support Makes a Difference

In many facilities, activities staff members or others are returning from home in the evenings to help organize events. Others are encouraging community and church groups, and even local and regional companies, to get involved. For example, Home Instead Senior Care, the nation's largest provider of non-medical care and companionship for seniors, with the assistance of The Gaithers, a national gospel music group, developed "After Dinner with the Gaithers," a DVD presentation that Home Instead Senior Care franchise owners can take into facilities.

The program includes an introduction from the group's co-founder, Bill Gaither, along with excerpts of his favorite songs. As part of the program, Home Instead Senior Care franchise owners play the taped introduction, along with a DVD of a Gaithers show, after dinner and then host a dessert reception.

The program has been well-received, particularly with Alzheimer's and dementia residents. "Many of the facilities' residents are fans of the Gaithers' music and can recall the songs and lyrics," said Home Instead Senior Care Founder Paul Hogan. "It's not only entertaining, but it's a memorable transition back to the past," he said.

Ninety-six-year-old Bernice Phillips, a resident at the 70-unit Renaissance Narrows Glen in Tacoma, WA, heard the Gaithers program at her facility. So when she learned that tickets were available to a live Gaithers performance about an hour from her home, she was eager to attend, said her Home Instead

Gentle Persuasion, Customized Activities Help Encourage Resident Participation

Facility staff can't force a resident to participate in activities, but many ALF managers have said that gentle persuasion, persistent reminders, and customized activities help ensure that from 75 to 90 percent of their residents are taking part in some event.

"Part of my job and that of my assistant is to contact as many residents as possible about what's going on," said Eric Dobner. "Sometimes we'll make phone calls to residents. Monthly calendars and weekly activity sheets also help," he added.

"There's a lady who moved into our facility who is very fun and social with a great sense of humor. But she wouldn't come out of her apartment. What first got her out was our Friday morning coffee house outings. She loves movies, so then she started coming out at night for those. She's doing great now," Dobner observed.

Finding a resident's interest is often the key to motivating that individual to participate in an activity, said Tim Cook. "We've had trouble getting one resident to interact with others because she doesn't feel like she needs to be here. We found out she was a tour guide and has videos of many of her trips. So beginning in January we've asked her to host getaway nights where she will narrate a trip to a different location and show her videos. We're all excited about starting that."

Another resident in the early stages of dementia had seldom left the house in the recent decade. "When she got here, it was only a week before she flourished. When we had our senior prom, our receptionist who hosted the event was dancing and this resident was trying to mimic her every move. It brought her son to tears. He couldn't say enough about how much better she was doing. Her family is here all the time now because she's more energetic and lively and fun to be around. We couldn't imagine her any other way."

Cook said the success of an event or activity should not be measured by how many participate. For instance, he reads the newspaper nearly every morning and only five or six residents show up. But several in that small group are not able or willing to participate in any other activities. "They're interested in hearing about everything—the current news, obituaries and marriages, to see if they know anybody. You have to think outside the box and have variety for everyone."

CAREGiversm Margo Wenstad. "It was a wonderful evening," Phillips said recently, recalling the event.

"We walked about a block to get to the concert," added Wenstad, who accompanied Phillips, along with another Home Instead Senior Care employee. "The concert lasted two hours, and she was comfortable the entire time. It was just wonderful. Events like this are absolutely keeping Bernice younger," said Wenstad, who's with Phillips 10 hours a day,

three days a week, providing companionship and non-medical care.

Wenstad said that Phillips, a retired hair stylist, is eager to participate in events from dawn to dusk. "If there's nothing scheduled at her ALF after dinner, she'll often ask me what's going on at the Glen, the independent facility next door where she used to live. So we'll go up to the front desk to inquire. I can't leave until we find out if she's missing out on anything," explained Wenstad.

Eric Dobner, activities director at the facility where Phillips lives, said his company's parent corporation, Renaissance Senior Living, has been encouraging its facilities to schedule more evening events and their staff is complying. A coffeehouse outing, which has been a popular Friday morning event, is being expanded to Friday evenings.

Easing the Transition

Amy Birkel, general manager of Remington Heights, a 140-bed Assisted Living Facility in Omaha, Nebraska, said regular destinations into the community that have been popular among residents at her facility are museums, shopping, dinners, plays and miniature golf in the summer. "The health benefits are definitely socialization and stimulation," she said. "They're getting transportation door-to-door and they're not just relying on their families to get out. They're going with a group of their friends," Birkel noted.

Activities can help ease the transition for new residents, Birkel added. "My generation is used to dorm living, but this generation didn't do that. They went from their parents' homes to their spouses' homes. When they first come in, a lot will want to stay in their apartments. It is activities like this that help them meet people and warm up. It's how they build friendships. So we want to make sure we're providing opportunities to do things all day long, seven days a week."

An organized evening activity also may spawn other events, Birkel said. "It's very common after an evening activity for residents to gather in different groups to start card games. Someone will say 'Call Millie and see if she wants to come down to play pitch.' They're doing that on their own, but it was the activity that got them together."

Activities Reap Benefits Beyond Fun

In addition to the social stimulation, there are other benefits of activities

as well. Several managers said that evening diversions help distract those residents with conditions such as the dementia syndrome Sundowner's which is characterized by agitation, anxiety, anger, and paranoia.

One recent study revealed that increasing activity helped dementia patients nap less during the day and sleep more at night. Over a 21-day period, residents in the study group received one or two hours of special activities geared to their interests and abilities, and often involving interaction with other residents. After 21 days, residents had decreased their nap time from 2 hours to 1¼ hours and were falling asleep faster and awakening less in the night. While the study focused on increasing day-

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Many activities also have an exercise advantage. Senior proms and ballroom dancing, which facilities usually offer in the evening, provide a healthy aerobic workout for older adults. Several facilities interviewed had walking groups, and bowling was a popular activity that could be offered during the day or the evening. "I have a degree in recreational therapy," said Activity Director Dobner, "and even an activity like bowling with a foam ball and pins seems basic but offers physical benefits. Residents have to work on balance in standing, dexterity in placing their fingers in the

holes of the balls, and hand-to-eye coordination in going through the motions of bowling."

There actually is a great deal of research showing that activity—both physical and mental—is a key to healthy aging. One of the latest studies on this topic, released in December 2005 and conducted at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), found that memory exercises and stress reduction, combined with a healthy diet and regular physical exercise, improved memory in older adults in as little as 14 days.²

Test participants followed a memory improvement plan that included brainteasers, crossword puzzles, and memory exercises, combined with physical fitness such as brisk daily walks.

As a result of the social, physical, and mental benefits of activities, efforts on the part of facilities to increase activities that extend into the evenings are being warmly received by residents as well as their families.

More than anything, evening activities just enhance a family atmosphere, facilities managers say. "We cry together, we laugh together," said Cook. "I tell my staff, 'We put in the best hours of our day here. Let's show these residents a good time.'" ALC

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Reference

1. From the full report titled, "Effect of Individualized Social Activity on Sleep in Nursing Home Residents with Dementia" printed in the September 2005 issue of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (Volume 53, Issue 9). The report is authored by Kathy Culpepper Richards, PhD, RN; Cornelia Beck, PhD, RN; and Patricia S. O'Sullivan, EdD; Valorie M. Shue, BA.
2. From a study presented December 2005 at the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology's Annual Meeting and conducted at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and funded by the Fran and Ray Stark Foundation Fund for Alzheimer's Disease Research, the Judith Olenick Elgart Fund for Research on Brain Aging, and the Parlow-Solomon Professorship on Aging. Lead investigator is Gary Small, M.D., Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA.