

St. John's Cottage Industry

Turning traditional long term care on its head

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Caregivers at St. John's Lutheran Ministries call them cottage miracles, and just about everybody has an example.

There's Tom Passe, who ended his conversational drought with a phone call to friends. There's Dick Thomas, who began ambling around behind his walker after being limited to a wheelchair.

There are others, too - people who started eating enough at meals to be taken off nutritional supplements and people who came out of their rooms after months or years of antisocial behavior.

They all blossomed after moving into one of the St. John's Green House Project residences - 12-person cottages that turn traditional long-term care on its head.

Two years after opening its first pair of cottages, St. John's this summer is moving residents into five more of the \$1.8 million homes.

By August, up to 84 elders will be living in the innovative residences, while the facility's remaining skilled-nursing patients will each have private rooms in the old nursing home building.

St. John's will have the first nursing home in the state at which all Medicaid patients will have private rooms, officials said.

It's also the first in the state - and one of just 11 in the nation - to embrace the Green House method, which does away with the institutional nature of long-term care.

St. John's has also become one of three national Green House Project training sites.

Leaders from 20 long-term care facilities in a dozen states gathered on the St. John's campus recently for the first such training, during which they toured cottages and met with residents and staff.

"You have to see it to believe it," said St. John's administrator Mike Follett. "It basically takes the current model, blows it up and rebuilds it from the ground up."

The sessions were effective: Some trainees said they were headed home to make converts of their staffs.

"I really think it's the answer to getting rid of institutionalism," said Jody Howorth, administrator for one of two nursing homes in an Anchorage, Alaska, health system. "When we walked into the cottages, it was self-evident. And then there were the stories."

"I'm going to do everything possible to make it happen" in Anchorage, where Providence Alaska Medical Center plans to rebuild a 200-bed nursing facility, Howorth said. "I'm committed."

Green House Project homes are built like oversized private residences, with 10 or 12 bedrooms adjacent to common kitchen, dining and living areas. Each room has its own bathroom, and residents eat meals together at long dining tables.



BOB ZELLAR/Gazette Staff
Martin Munoz helps Alice Worland unpack Wednesday after she moved to Fischer Cottage on the campus of St. John's Lutheran Ministries.

But they don't have to eat with the group if they don't want to, and that's the key to Green House living. Elders make many decisions for themselves, including when and how long to sleep and what and how much to eat.

On the day of the recent Green House Project training, when film crews from PBS television were also on the St. John's campus, cottage resident Caroline Ackerman was just finishing breakfast in bed at 11 a.m.

"It's lovely," Ackerman said as she patted her cat, Maggie.

That sentiment is heard again and again from people associated with the cottages.

"I just think this is a very exciting thing happening over here," said Lois Thomas, whose husband, Dick, lives in one of the cottages. "It just feels so good."

On his first morning as a cottage resident, a caregiver asked Dick Thomas what he wanted for breakfast, his wife said. He requested a cheese omelet, and that's what he got.

"He ate the whole thing," Lois Thomas said.

Skip Venard, whose mother, Alice Worland, lives in another one of the cottages, marveled at its homey atmosphere.

"You ring the doorbell," Venard said. "You're invited in."

Such features are typical in assisted-living facilities, and the first two St. John's cottages are licensed for assisted-living patients.

The organization also operates an assisted-living cottage in Laurel and a transitional-care cottage - for people recovering from injuries or illnesses - on its Billings campus.

But skilled-nursing patients need more intensive care, and St. John's leaders worked hard to convince regulators and others that it could be provided in a cottage setting.

They hope the five skilled-nursing cottages opening this summer will prove their point and make it possible to eventually move all of their skilled-nursing patients into cottages.

They want to demolish the existing nursing home building.

Private-pay residents are paying flat rates of \$219 or \$207 a day to live in the skilled-nursing cottages. St. John's leaders hope to begin construction within two years on another set of cottages for its Medicaid patients.



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The cottages on the campus of St. John's Ministries border the main building complex and Shiloh Road, as seen from Zimmerman Park.

The Green House Project is spearheaded by NCB Capital Impact, the nonprofit arm of a Washington, D.C., bank. NCB offers predevelopment loans to institutions interested in the care model.

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