

## Reaping the Financial Benefits of Investing in Wellness Programs

Senior living communities are discovering the many benefits of fitness programs. Effective wellness programs can decrease falls, reduce agitation in seniors with Alzheimer's, and significantly decrease costs for senior living providers.

Swimming, strength training, Zumba—these may not be activities normally associated with older people, but many senior living communities are reaping financial benefits by offering physical activity-oriented programming for their residents.

These days, whether it's in independent living, assisted living, or even memory care communities, a variety of programs seek to keep older adults strong, healthy, and on their feet. They're focusing on preventing illness and frailty, rather than taking care of people after they become sick or weak—and the programs are working, health and wellness coordinators say.

While senior living providers may not be introducing various health-conscious classes with the direct intention of saving money, it can be a welcomed side effect. It's generally less expensive to care for healthier residents. And the healthier they are, the more satisfied they're likely to be—a key factor in influencing controllable turnover and retaining residents longer, says the International Council on Active Aging in a white paper on the business implications of wellness programs in senior housing communities.

### Fewer Falls & Hospitalizations with Strength Training

The Terraces of Phoenix, a continuing care retirement community owned and operated by California nonprofit public benefit corporation ABHOW (American Baptist Homes of the West), has seen the number of resident falls and injuries decrease after high participation in its wellness programs.

Out of The Terraces' 208 independent living residents, 124 participate in the community's fitness program, whether by attending classes, participating in personal training, or using the gym or pool independently, says Aneil Koerper, the health and fitness coordinator.

All ten of the offered classes are designed for various levels of physical ability and have the same goals: increase lower body strength and power, and improve balance and strength muscle groups for activities of daily living. The classes can have a significant impact on not only the residents' health, but the community's bottom line.

In one study conducted by the American Senior Fitness Association, every percentage point increase in a resident's Functional Independence Measure (FIM) reduced their daily cost of care by 50 cents.

If each of The Terraces' 124 fitness programs, participants increased their FIM score by 5 percentage points. That could represent savings of \$310 a day. In one year, the community could save more than \$113,000.

"Every year, the fitness members go through an annual fitness testing, and we can compare with the previous year to see if they are improving or if they declined," says Koerper. "If people decline, we catch it right away and encourage them to go to classes or sign up for personal training to get back to their base fitness."

In 2010, the independent living community had 67 falls—only two of which were by people from the fitness program. The next year, in 2011, the community decreased its overall amount of falls and serious injuries. That year, out of 48 falls among independent living residents, only one was from a fitness program participant. Even then, she wasn't seriously injured and did not go to the hospital, says Koerper.

### **Saving Money by Keeping Residents Independent Longer**

Starting in 2010, Charlotte, N.C.-based Senior Living Communities began implementing a few different programs encompassing aquatic water therapy, strength training, and specialized programming for people with chronic diseases and functional impairments.

They have been recognized by the Assisted Living Federation of America for three years running in its 'Best of the Best' Resident Health and Wellness category, and Senior Living Communities' chief communications officer Katie Huffstetler says the drive behind the wellness initiative is to help residents live more independently and have an opportunity to stay in their homes for the rest of their lives.

Many residents share that goal, says Huffstetler, and wellness participants in her company's communities have been able to reduce their dependence on professional caregiving—which in turn can cut down on costs.

"We provide what we feel is a clinical wellness product outside of a clinical setting," Huffstetler says. "Do we have to provide rehab for all these folks? No. We're able to manage that in a more cost-effective manner, and we're able to achieve results."

Residents in one SLC community who completed a program to improve incontinence issues cumulatively reduced their number of daily bathroom trips by 50%, in addition to increasing the duration between trips from an average of an hour and a half to three and a half hours.

After completing an aquatic course to alleviate lower back pain, participants in another class cumulatively reported a 49.5% decrease in pain while performing several range-of-motion movements.

### **Wellness and Memory Care**

Results from these programs aren't just physical in nature; aquatic classes designed for residents with Alzheimer's and related dementia can help reduce one of the disease's biggest symptoms: agitation.

Not only can these types of classes serve to redirect energy in productive manner and help residents reduce their agitation and anxiety, says Huffstetler, they can also help caregivers connect with the people they're caring for on a daily basis.

Consistent caregivers who know the residents very well are crucial when caring for people with memory impairments, says Anne Ellett, senior vice president of health services at Irvine, Calif.-based Silverado Senior Living, which focuses exclusively on memory care.

"That's our first line of prevention for the residents," she says, followed by 24-hour on-site nursing, accessible physicians, engagement programs to keep residents active and moving, and a medication reduction program.

Alzheimer's patients are very costly to the healthcare system, Ellett says, and tend to go to the hospital more frequently, stay longer, and have higher rates of readmission. But thanks to its wellness and prevention strategies, Silverado has a 5% transfer rate to acute care, compared to skilled nursing's 8% to 12%.

"Our goal is always to keep the residents out of the hospital; we want to decrease hospitalizations, because it's expensive for the family, expensive for the hospital, and traumatic to the resident," she says.

Keeping people in the most independent level of care is senior living providers' goal, especially considering that a community's cash flow margin is highest for residents in independent living, according to a Ziegler Senior Living Finance presentation.

"What we try to do is make our residents as independent as possible. If we're in position to operate a small skilled nursing facility with fewer than 20 beds, and care for people in less expensive settings, it reduces costs to them [as well as] our operating costs—significantly," says Huffstetler.

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