Culture Change in Nursing Homes

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Quality of care in nursing homes must be addressed from all angles: regulatory, legal, advocacy, and within the nursing home itself. An emerging effort to promote a new way of living and working in nursing homes is known as "culture change." Culture change involves rethinking values and practices of a nursing home from top to bottom, inside and out. It is not about change for its own sake. It is about change that brings all who are involved in the nursing home culture – staff, management, residents, and families – to a new way of working that creates a humane environment supporting each resident's life, dignity, rights, and freedom. Culture change is about de-institutionalizing services and individualizing care.

Providers report that a true commitment to fundamental culture change improves the quality of care and quality of life for nursing home residents and the quality of work experience for staff. From a consumer perspective, it is important to support and advocate for creative approaches with this focus and learn from them.

It is also important to keep in mind that simply stating an organization is pursuing culture change is not enough to ensure high quality care, and that often working towards a new culture can be disruptive in its own way, as organizations seek to redefine work roles in order to put person before task. Consumers must be active partners in this process. We must educate ourselves about all that is involved in this transformation, just as providers and other stakeholders are educating themselves.

The Pioneer Network is an organization working with NCCNHR and others around the country to foster the spread of culture change principles and practices. Pioneer principles are used to guide their work.

Pioneer Principles

- Know each person
- Each person can and does make a difference

- Relationship is the fundamental building block of a transformed culture
- Respond to spirit, as well as mind and body
- Risk taking is a normal part of life
- Put the person before the task
- All elders are entitled to self-determination, wherever they live
- Community is the antidote to institutional-ization
- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you – yes, the Golden Rule
- Promote the growth and development of all
- Shape and use the potential of the environment in all its aspects: physical, organizational, psycho/social/spiritual
- Practice self-examination, searching for new creativity and opportunities for doing better
- Recognize that culture change and transformation are not destinations, but a journey, always a work in progress

Person-Directed Practices

- Establish resident direction in goal setting and care;
- Re-organize and empower staff, focusing on responsibility, accountability and strong support to direct care workers (resident assistants);
- Enable resident choice in aspects of daily life significant to the resident, such as time getting up and going to bed; eating; naps; times out-of-doors; favorite pastimes; times and methods of bathing; content of meals and the ways meals are served;
- Emphasize the relationship between the resident and resident assistant as central to quality of life for both;
- Create opportunities for relationships between hands-on caregivers and residents by using consistent assignment of staff
- Hold weekly meetings or regular learning circles with staff concerning knowing each resident, team building, and seeking staff's opinions;

- Give staff a voice in managing their own time and schedules;
- Accept without judgment the resident's family as part of the community and team;
- Base toilet use schedule on the individual's bowel and bladder patterns;
- Teach and model good communication, especially staff listening skills;
- Mix the presence of children into daily life
- Welcome and provide for residents' animals for companionship, meaning, and delight;
- Maintain plenty of living plants inside and out to enable daily contact with the natural world;
- Encourage creative ideas from staff, residents, and families;
- Continuously educate staff on culture change;
- Provide resident assistant training which includes mentorship and support;
- Use a resident assistant career ladder in which wages are tied to performance and education;
- Design and organize in-service training to make it person (resident) centered;
- Support strong, active family councils;
- Develop small units of 10 to 15 residents;
- Include child day-care facilities in design.

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Basis for Culture Change in Law

The Federal law applying to nursing homes, the Nursing Home Reform Law of 1987, requires that each nursing home "care for its residents in such a manner and in such an environment as will promote maintenance or enhancement of the quality of life of each resident." This requirement emphasizes dignity, choice, and self-determination for residents, as do the principles of the Pioneers. Furthermore, each nursing home is required by law to "provide services and activities to attain or maintain the highest practicable physical, mental, and psychosocial well-being of each resident in accordance with a written plan of care which…is initially prepared, with participation to the extent practicable, of the resident, the resident's family, or legal representative." This means that a resident should not decline in health or well-being as a result of the way a nursing home provides care.

These provisions of the law require that resident care should be individualized to meet the needs of the resident. Culture change is an attempt to make this part of the law a reality.

Examples of Culture Change

The implementation of a philosophy of culture change can take many forms depending upon the challenges faced by the organization. Strong models of culture change approaches are illustrated in the work of the early Pioneers, who were brought together for the first time in 1995 by NCCNHR. The work of the early Pioneers is spreading beyond first innovators as more and more organizations begin their transformational change journey. There are different strategies for culture change, including the Eden Alternative and the Wellspring approaches. Be sure to ask your nursing home if they are using any culture change techniques.

For More Information

To learn more about culture change in nursing homes and other aspects of long-term care, contact the Pioneer Network at (585) 271-7570; www.PioneerNetwork.net; blog: www.PioneerExchange.org; or NCCNHR at (202) 332-2275; nccnhr@nccnhr.org; www.nccnhr.org.

Other free resources about culture change include:

- Quality Partners of Rhode Island, which has training tools and resources to support the "How to Change." www.riqualitypartners.org; click on the nursing home section.
- Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, which has training materials to grow leadership and supervisory skills among staff. www.paraprofessional.org/Sections/resources.htm. Click on Supervision.
- The Commonwealth Fund in New York City has a video on its website that explains culture change and offers visual examples of the change in progress. www.cmwf.org/topics/topics_show.htm?doc_id=372482.
- From CMS, the "Artifacts of Culture Change Tool," which is helpful in assessing an organization's status on the culture change journey in addition to provoking ideas about next steps. http://siq.air.org.
- Eden Alternative tools can be found at http://edenalt.com/edentols.htm.