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ELDERCARE

Ageing Well at Mather LifeWays

BY APRIL TERRERI

Elder care has really come a long way over the last few generations. Leading the charge in demanding higher levels of quality elder care and innovative services are baby boomers, who will expect more in these areas than previous generations. Mather LifeWays, providing elder care for 67 years, is at the vanguard in creating innovative ways to help older adults age well.

Headquartered in Evanston, Illinois, Mather LifeWays is preparing itself to meet those demands through three areas: its senior residences, community-based programs, and the Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging.

More Residential and Care Options

The care of elders went through a dramatic shift over the latter part of the last century. For generations, the solidity of the nuclear family provided the care and peace of mind aging parents and relatives

required. But all of that changed from the 1960s through the 1980s, when there was a dramatic shift as care moved from the family home to nursing homes, explains Mary Leary, CEO and president. "This shift was due, in large part, to families becoming more decentralized as greater numbers of women began working outside of the home."

At the beginning of this shift, nursing homes had a hospital-like model, assuming older adults would need care in an institutional type of setting. As late as 1990, 10.2 percent of adults over the age of 75 resided in nursing homes. Today, that number is down to 7.4 percent.

The evolution continued and as the health of older adults improved significantly, they no longer needed to move on to a nursing home. Long-term care began to be perceived more as a residential and hospitality-oriented business with more choices provided to serve the various needs of older adults, Leary says. "They can receive services in



Mary Leary

their homes, or they can choose to live in a continuing care retirement community where they can live independently until they require more intensive services and care that the community can deliver to them," Leary says.

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Baby Boomers Influence Models of Care

A recent AARP survey concluded that about 75 percent of baby boomers want to live in their own homes for as long as possible, so this population is definitely influencing how and what models of care and services are developing.

Technology will play an important role, Leary adds. "We are seeing more housing developers bringing in more and more universal design concepts into new homes that will enable older adults to age in place more comfortably. These include simple things such as lever door handles versus door-knobs, making it easier for adults with arthritis to open a door. They are also installing communications systems that will allow people to have their daily health vitals checked from a remote location."

Today's aging adults are able to stay independent longer today because of their overall good health and their focus on wellness and fitness. Leary reports a national long-term care survey found that the disability rate for older adults dropped from 26 percent in 1982 to 20 percent in 1999 – even though there was a one-third increase in the number of older adults nationwide.

Responding to Changing Needs

Mather LifeWays continues to keep a step ahead of the evolving senior healthcare delivery industry by first monitoring the changes in senior lifestyles and expectations and then by developing delivery models to satisfy clients. For instance, one very popular community-based program is Mather's-More Than a Café that the Chicago Tribune

dubbed 'Starbucks for seniors.' "It's a fun concept and our cafés were also recognized in US News & World Report and the New York Times as an innovative opportunity for older adults to participate in social engagement," Leary says.

There are three of these cafés located throughout Chicago. Although they are geared for folks 55 and older, Leary says the cafés are open to anyone who wants to have breakfast or lunch – or who wants to socialize and learn. In addition to providing a safe and comfortable place in which to stay involved in their communities, adults 55 and older can also participate in a variety of classes Mather offers at the cafés.

Another change for the better in healthcare delivery is the mechanism of Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements. "In the past when people needed long-term care they typically needed to receive it in a nursing home to benefit from these two reimbursements," explains Leary. "Now there are new public health programs allowing people to receive reimbursement for care that's provided in their home or in their community. So I see this as a positive improvement that offers people more options because it costs a lot to reside in a nursing home. The average nationally today is about \$168 per day – or \$61,000 a year. It's estimated that in just 15 years the cost will increase to \$336 a day at an inflation rate of 5 percent a year. So this means we definitely need to look for new models."

New models of delivery will continue to evolve – whether that means more glamorous types of adult day programs allowing older adults to get out and get involved with people during the day – or new types of senior housing programs. "One issue we are

watching is how care is done on a one-on-one basis now," Leary says. "But if we are going to experience the long-term healthcare worker shortage we think is coming, we will have to find different ways of delivering the services and care. This means a caregiver might have to meet the needs of two or three people at the same time, whether through technology or other improved means of communicating."

The impending shortage in the industry is cause for concern. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation noted that by 2030 there might not be sufficient resources or effective systems to meet the needs of the increased population of older adults. "There is concern that not enough students are enrolling in geriatrics programs. So there has to be a multi-pronged effort to help assure these needs will be met in the years to come."

Mather LifeWays is doing its part to help alleviate the crisis. It offers online gerontology courses for nurses and other healthcare professionals to entice them to enter the field of gerontology. It also offers a LEAP (Learn, Empower, Achieve, Produce) program for which it received federal funding as a pilot project started six years ago. "It is a successful workforce development program that helps educate, empower, and retain nurses and certified nursing assistants in long-term care settings," explains



Mather's-More Than a Café Square Dance event.



Bill Campbell of Channel 7 (ABC-TV) Chicago (left) has appeared at several Mather's Cafés to give a presentation about life coaching

Leary. The program is currently working in more than 350 communities in 38 states. "Through our Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging, we were able to measure the effectiveness of this program and we found significant improvements in resident satisfaction because staff professionals are staying with us. So now we have a lower turnover rate which helps improve the quality of care we provide."

For more information, visit www.matherlifeways.com.