

3 Ways Senior Living Nonprofits Combat Scrutiny

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In an economy still reeling from the Great Recession, some nonprofit senior living communities are facing increased scrutiny regarding their tax-exempt status.

"Nonprofits are coming into the spotlight," said Nikki Rineer, president of research company Holleran during a recent webinar with Mather LifeWays titled "Community Outreach Tips and Tactics for Today's Nonprofit." Adding to the pressure, Rineer says, some municipalities hit by hard economic times argue the government cannot afford what amounts to a subsidy worth billions of dollars every year.

"A lot of leadership staff will say, 'We're giving so much in benevolent care, surely that shows we have an impact,'" Rineer said. "But on the other side of that, how many residents does that actually impact? And, were those residents from the local community or did they move from another state?"

While receiving nonprofit status stipulates various degrees of ongoing care for residents regardless of ability to pay and community service activities, nonprofit providers are going beyond what's required to show their value and create partnerships that will benefit the rapidly growing senior demographic.

Nonprofit Mather LifeWays identified a lack of resources for seniors surrounding its Evanston, Ill.-based continuing care retirement community (CCRC) who were choosing to age in place.

The provider's solution was to operate [café plus](#) ^[1] establishments in those areas. While the three facilities are primarily eateries, they also offer wellness and entertainment programming designed for seniors.

"We're trying to solve social isolation," said Betsie Sassen, vice president of community initiatives, during the webinar. The café spaces are funded by an annual \$.5 million contribution from Mather LifeWays, in addition to outside funding. While food and programming is not free, costs are kept low for seniors' benefit.

Senior living communities need to demonstrate through public awareness what the nonprofit difference entails, says Randy Eilts, vice president of public relations at senior living advertising and marketing firm GlynnDevins.

"It's important that they publicize how they do give back to the community," he said.

Often the first step toward giving back "bigger and better" is conducting some type of needs assessment research to determine where one can have the greatest impact, Rineer says.

"Often I'll hear from communities, 'We don't know where to begin,'" Rineer says. "What does the external community need? Do more investigation into something out there you can impact a little bit more."

Here are three ways nonprofit providers are enhancing their relationships with communities beyond campus walls.

1. Sharing Space

Nonprofit senior living provider ABHOW's more than 43 retirement communities routinely share space with service clubs, religious organizations and other nonprofits, David Ferguson, president and CEO of ABHOW, told SHN.

ABHOW's Oakland, Calif.-based CCRC, Piedmont Gardens, donates space to Tremolos, a group of residents and community members with Parkinson's disease, to exercise and socialize. Politicians also use the communities' spaces to speak with constituents.

Offering space for local community members to host meetings, and inviting the public to attend entertainment programs and guest lectures can provide a valuable resource for outside community members, Eilts said.

Many of ABHOW's communities, with 12 being CCRCs and the rest senior affordable housing, operate thrift shops that are open to the public.

"The one in Oakland has an annual sale that draws thousands of people, and residents use that money to support their [volunteer] efforts," Ferguson says.

2. Volunteering Goods and Services

In Santa Barbara, Calif., ABHOW's Valle Verde residents have an annual tradition of making handcrafted toys for children in need. In other communities, residents make sandwiches for homeless youth and knit blankets for neglected children, among other volunteer activities.

"It benefits us and our reputation," Ferguson said, noting that city officials voice support when they learn the impact such communities make for the local community.

Providers also give back through participating in fundraising events, especially for those causes that impact the population of people served in senior living communities, Eilts said.

"A lot of senior living communities participate in the annual Alzheimer's walk, so as a community they encourage their residents and staff to create teams and raise funds," Eilts said. "It's a great way to show, 'We're giving back,' and it ties into the field of senior living, especially those communities that provide memory support."

Offering an online virtual community for older Americans nationwide is another way nonprofits are expanding their footprint.

Mather LifeWays offers free online resources that promote ongoing education and entertainment.

"Our virtual online community had 1,800 unique, engaged visitors in 2013," Sassen says, adding that message boards encourage conversation among site visitors.

3. Publicizing Accomplishments

Creating a newsletter highlighting movers and shakers in the community, as well as sharing resident and staff volunteer efforts is an easy way to show how a nonprofit has social accountability in its surrounding area, Eilts says.

ABHOW issues an annual social accountability report that details the volunteer efforts of staff and residents for those in and outside of its retirement communities.

In addition to highlighting volunteer efforts, the report provides metrics regarding community benefits and the value of services offered in facilities' surrounding areas.

In 2013, \$78,000 worth of facility space was provided to outside community members throughout ABHOW's network, the report shows. The collective value of volunteer services to surrounding communities in the same year was \$943,000.

Embracing social media to share stories on sites such as Facebook can also promote an organization's advocacy, Eilts said.

"Sharing stories as they happen is a way to say, 'Hey, look we do give back,'" Eilts said. "For example, if they invite the local Rotary Club to utilize their meeting space, post a photo and say something like, 'Here's the local Rotary Club in our meeting room. We're so happy they could come here and use our space.'"

Written by [Cassandra Dowell](#) ^[2]

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[1] café plus: **<http://seniorhousingnews.com/2014/07/17/4-ways-to-expand-your-senior-living-footprint/>**

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