

Building Communities: The Activity Professional's Role

Relationships are the heart of long-term care. "Through a positive relationship, all things can happen, without one nothing" (H. Shore 1974). Relationships with residents, staff, families and the community are central to the culture change movement and person-centered care. Creating "communities" and "homelike environments" within the long-term care setting is the focus of both advocacy groups and regulatory agencies. A positive atmosphere of a facility enriches the lives of those who live there and those who work there. Dr. Bill Thomas states "We have to build a system that honors and enriches all who live and work within it." What is the activity managers' role in building this system? What are the attributes of a "community" and how can the activity department manager play an important role in building a positive atmosphere for both residents and staff?

Within the past year, I have presented numerous workshops on the topic of "building community." The first step towards building a community is defining one. Each facility should spend time identifying the key components that contribute to a "sense of community". This can be done for the activity department as well. The following list of practices can be considered when defining a community.

- There is shared decision making
- Responsibilities are shared
- Meaningful relationships are encouraged
- Contributions are recognized
- Individual strengths are known and reinforced
- Respect is shown for other's opinions
- Individuals feel a belongingness or attachment to the group
- Individual preferences are understood

Here is a sample definition that I have developed.

"Building community is creating a place where people live and work together, share something in common, participate in shared decision making, respect each other's opinions, make contributions to the group, have meaningful relationships with each other and a high level of commitment to the team."

The second step toward building community is assessing the current "feel" or atmosphere of the department or facility. How would the staff of the activity department or facility describe the workplace environment? Is there a high level of satisfaction, do employees feel valued, appreciated, listened to, encouraged and cared about? As an activity manager it is imperative to understand the attitude of the staff toward the workplace environment and relationships. Evaluate each of the following statements to determine strengths and potential areas of improvement.

Rank each of the following	1	2	3	4	5
1. Staff are encouraged to establish personal relationships with residents	1	2	3	4	5
2. Staff develop relationships across departments and levels	1	2	3	4	5

3. Staff have ample opportunities to voice their opinions and share in decision making	1 2 3 4 5
4. Staff knows daily preferences of residents and understands what is important to them	1 2 3 4 5
5. There is high involvement between the staff, residents and families	1 2 3 4 5
6. Staff feel strong bonds with members of their team, spirit is high	1 2 3 4 5
7. Staff feel valued and appreciated by the management	1 2 3 4 5
8. Education and opportunities for growth are available for staff	1 2 3 4 5
9. Risk taking is encouraged	1 2 3 4 5
10. Staff are regularly exposed to new people and ideas	1 2 3 4 5
11. Staff understand how their work reinforces the facilities mission	1 2 3 4 5

After completing this assessment, identify an area or areas that will be addressed in the department's goals for the coming year.

The third step is to develop a plan to meet the identified needs. The most frequently identified area of need in the a recent workshop is

#2- Staff develop relationships across departments and levels

#9- Risk taking is encouraged

Taking the time to pay attention to the sense of community within your facility will reinforce the critical components of person-centered care:

- resident choice and control
- home-like environments
- nurturing relationships

“A positive work environment and work friendships keep people in their present position for longer periods of time. It takes 30% additional salary to move someone to a new facility when the person is HAPPY in their current job” (Kathy Brown RN).

Create a TEAMWORK taskforce to plan and implement “community building” events on a routine basis. Consider the following suggestions.

TEAMWORK: Task Force

Consider the following points to create a positive home atmosphere in your care community.

1. Reinforce positive interactions and spontaneous involvement between care giving staff and residents. Give praise that is specific and explains how the gesture positively impacts the resident. Capture the moment of the interaction in pictures and display.
2. Include direct care staff in the planning of activities that are of interest to them. Review products in catalogs to show the opportunities that are available.
3. Implement activities that use the talents and hobbies of the staff. Include interest questions as part of orientation. Schedule time for sharing or demonstrations. Develop a talent "data bank."
4. Teach reminiscing techniques to all staff. Role play the use of life story information for making introductions and reinforcing past life patterns and themes.
5. Make a list of 15 "things" that a staff member can do with a resident while providing care, such as discuss a recipe of the food being served, hum a tune or tell a joke.
6. Develop socialization games that motivate staff and residents to get to know each other better. Weekend trivia teams, scavenger hunts to find a resident who.....(met Mickey Mantle) or Question of the week (What famous people have you crossed paths with?)
7. Teach staff to create opportunities for the residents to share their wisdom and give advice.
8. Implement activities that staff and residents can do together. Bonds are made when people participate together, especially through music and dancing.
9. Plan service activities that residents implement for staff. Encourage resident "mentoring" of employees.
10. Schedule classes for staff to complete holiday decoration or craft projects along with residents.
11. Celebrate life events of both residents and staff. Follow important family news through announcements and bulletin boards. Highlight military service family members. Display family portraits at holiday times.
12. Host an international affair to learn about the cultural traditions of your employees.
13. Implement a "secret pal" program

14. Enable staff to participate in themed activities by providing a trunk of props or accessories (ball caps, crazy hats, funny glasses)
15. Partner staff and residents in competitive games such as Bingo. When the resident wins, the staff member wins as well, "Bingo Buddies"
16. Make an employee scrapbook: highlight family traditions of your staff
17. Adopt a service project that the staff can work on together.
18. Implement activities to make staff laugh and have fun (minute to win it, pie throwing, dancing with the stars, talent competition or photo contests)
19. Display "baby or kid" pictures of both staff and residents for others to guess.
- 20. More.....**