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Small Providers With Big Ideas

by Dianne Molvig

Opportunities and challenges represent flipsides of the same coin. It's a fact of life that small aging-services organizations know well.

On the one hand, their smaller size allows them to be more flexible and to respond more quickly to the needs of their residents and communities. On the other, compared to larger organizations, they may have to make do with fewer resources.

Still, many small providers seem to have an enormous supply of what matters most: heart, creativity and innovative ideas.

Support to Stay Healthy, Independent

Camden, NJ, population 77,000, is one of the poorest, most crime-ridden cities in the country. Sitting in the midst of this urban area is [Fair Share Northgate II](#), a high-rise apartment building providing a home and safe haven in 402 affordable housing units, of which 308 are for elderly or disabled residents. Northgate II is part of Fair Share Housing Development, a not-for-profit founded by Peter J. O'Connor, a public interest attorney who has been counsel to the plaintiffs since 1971 in the landmark Mount Laurel litigation which requires that all 566 municipalities in New Jersey provide their "fair share" of the regional need for affordable housing.



Fair Share Housing Development

Marilyn Mock, director of social services (standing) and social worker Paquita Lopez (center with cards) join residents of Northgate II for a socialization activity in the building's wellness room.

A few years ago, the [Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers](#) (CCHP) designated Northgate II as a “hot spot”—that is, a location where residents had frequent hospitalizations and emergency room visits. As a result, their health care costs were extremely high. CCHP and Northgate II formed a partnership to find solutions.

“The idea was to marry health care, social services and housing to come up with something that would lower health care costs, improve health outcomes for our residents and also allow them to age in place,” says Marilyn Mock, director of support services for Northgate II. Many of the building’s older residents have lived there for decades.

Working together, CCHP and Northgate II hope to create a service model that could be used with high-risk, high-needs elderly and other Medicaid users in other cities across the country. The partnership has created New Jersey’s first Medicaid Accountable Care Organization (ACO).

The first piece put in place in 2011 was an on-site medical clinic, operated by [Reliance Medical Group](#), which makes it easier for Northgate II residents to access primary care. Beyond that, the goal is for the Northgate II social services department to become a “care coordination hub” for residents returning from hospitalizations.

Northgate II has added several other components in the past couple of years to improve residents’ well-being. A survey and a residents’ advisory board give residents input into what the offerings ought to be. “Overwhelmingly, they’re interested in exercise, wellness and nutrition,” Mock says.

Thus, Northgate II offers Zumba dance and walking classes, and it launched Enhance®Wellness, a motivational behavior change program targeted to older adults with chronic conditions. “That’s supported by a community health worker,” Mock says, “who works with residents on an ongoing basis, one-on-one, to track their progress.” The same person also leads a “laughter clinic,” in both Spanish and English, to promote emotional health.

Northgate II partners with other local agencies to bring additional services to residents. For instance, the [Food Bank of South Jersey](#) delivers food once a month to residents age 60 and over, as does [Camden Fellowship Housing](#).

Plans for more services are in the works. A chronic disease self-management class, offered in partnership with the [Camden Area Health Education Center](#), will start this fall. Elderly residents soon will gain access to assisted living services to help them stay independent, through a partnership with [Caring, Inc.](#), which also will begin a social day program at the Northgate II community center to help combat social isolation.

Northgate II also hopes to make in-home counseling services available to residents, dependent on obtaining funding, and it intends to start a grief/loss support group. Says Mock, “That will address the emotional aspects of health and wellness.”

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