



County-Skilled Care Facilities making facilities more efficient by design

Despite budget challenges and rising healthcare costs, Wisconsin County governments are finding innovative ways to provide high quality care for their aging residents. While part of the formula for success has been leveraging state and federal incentives to “right-size” care facilities, counties have also reduced the financial impact on taxpayers by implementing efficiencies in skilled nursing care.



County-Skilled Care Facilities

Improving Efficiency

Some county-assisted skilled nursing facilities are providing improved service more effectively through a new model of care. This resident-centered approach utilizes a “household” concept in which small numbers of private resident rooms are clustered around a common area, with space for dining, social activities, bathing and nursing support. The result is greater staff efficiency, greater consistency in care and daily routines that are more closely tailored to residents’ needs. Residents also benefit from a more home-like environment. A skilled nursing facility’s ability to implement this new model of care is highly dependent on the physical environment.

Facility Renovation vs. New Construction

As counties evaluate their care services, many are reviewing their existing nursing homes and skilled nursing facilities to decide if aging buildings can be renovated to support the “household” concept or if they need to build a new facility. Part of the decision is market-driven; counties interested in private pay residents must offer facilities and amenities that will attract those residents. Counties must also consider the impact of the Baby Boomers, a generation of 75 million adults (or 29% of the U.S. population) that are approaching age 70.



Lakeland Health Care Center, a skilled nursing facility owned by Walworth County, faced the need to either build new or renovate. The center engaged PRA for assistance with its evaluation, after research indicated PRA is the industry leader in county-assisted skilled nursing facility design. The outcome was a decision to construct a replacement skilled care facility.

Case Study:

Lakeland Health Care Center - Elkhorn, Wisconsin

Designed by PRA, the center embodies the “household” concept, with households of 15 beds located in four 30-bed wings or “neighborhoods.” Each resident has a private room with a sink and toilet. The activity center at the heart of the facility incorporates a park-like feel through plenty of natural light from the high clerestory windows, natural materials and an abundance of trees and plants. A common area located off of the activity center features a beauty salon, clinic, occupational and physical therapy services, a chapel, a multipurpose/assembly area and a café/coffee shop. The center accommodates 120 residents.

The Process

Prior to building, Walworth County and Lakeland Health Care Center began envisioning and planning for the future care needs of Walworth County residents. The center’s aging building needed to be addressed, and both organizations collaborated to ensure that a more efficient skilled nursing facility was designed for their residents. PRA conducted a master planning study and provided several options for consideration. After reviewing the study, the County Board and the center decided their efforts and funds were best spent on construction of a new facility (vs. an existing renovation).

Intelligent Design

The new center’s single-story design provided for efficiencies in the use of materials during construction and staffing efficiencies through the use of an “household” concept. For example, nursing support, dining, housekeeping and laundry are now located within each household, placing the caregivers physically closer to each resident. Due to the shortage of

qualified caregivers, each staff member is performing multiple tasks, becoming more versatile by necessity.

This design also supports improved levels of care. Staffing is more consistent within each household, and residents see familiar faces more often and feel a greater sense of comfort. Additionally, the smaller group setting allows for increased flexibility in accommodating residents' individual preferences for diet, exercise, personal and medical care and activities.

Because caregivers have such a critical role in skilled nursing facilities, PRA spent substantial time with the center's staff in developing resident room design. Every aspect of the room was surveyed and discussed, and life-sized room mock-ups were built to solicit the staff's feedback, examine views from within the room, evaluate placement of lighting, electricity, heating and cooling and ensure proper clearances were provided for resident beds, equipment and traffic.

Destination Design

PRA also incorporated "destination design" to improve quality of resident life. Realizing that many residents have limited mobility and limited outdoor activity time due to Wisconsin's climate, the firm brought the outdoors inside by creating a



"central park" in the middle of the facility. Park benches and an area for larger group gatherings make it a welcoming place to socialize. The park's presence and adjacent common area offerings give residents a place to interact with one another.

Integrating Technology

New and emerging technology were also a consideration in the design of the center. PRA worked with vendors and an electrical consultant to help the center select the best monitoring and nurse call system for resident and staff needs. Lakeland chose a nurse call system with hard-wired and wireless components that allows staff to carry hand-held call devices for greater efficiency. PRA incorporated appropriate technology access points into the design of the new facility.

Leveraging Universal Design

Resident rooms and households are designed specifically to:

- Ensure physical safety and psychological security through spaces that are scaled and located in a manner similar to a residential home
- Provide for an environment that maximizes all the available choices and opportunities for self-determination through accessible indoor and outdoor spaces
- Provide for spaces that generate opportunities for meaningful interactions among residents, families, staff and community
- Support caregivers through strategically placed and universal staff support areas

The use of universal design is a growing trend in the design of skilled nursing facilities and other long-term care buildings. As counties offer a wider range of services in the continuum of long-term care, their facilities must be increasingly adaptable to residents' needs.



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Kim is a partner of the firm and highly involved in PRA's long-term care studio. If you would like to learn more about the transformational changes occurring in long-term care facility planning and design, please contact Kim.