

As I see it

By Ed Eilert, District 4

As time passes, we all face issues of caring for family members who require assistance in meeting daily living needs.

Some of us are able to provide in-home services, but many are eventually required to secure more intense professional care. With that reality in mind, I want to reflect on the progress of the Johnson County Nursing Center (JCNC) and Geriatric Education Resource and Training Institute (GERTI). In just five short years, they have transformed what formerly was an institutional setting into “home” for the residents who live there.

Gone are the fears of closing the nursing home—fears that Johnson County families experienced in December 2001 and 2002. Gone are the walls of white, the shining white linoleum tile floors, and the congregate meals.

JCNC today offers a calm environment filled with warmth and signs of home. The floors are carpeted, rooms are painted warm colors, fireplaces blaze, and kitchens are open to residents whenever they are hungry. Ah! Just like our own homes!

Residents who live at JCNC in Olathe no longer live on Hall A, B, C, or D, as in a hospital setting. Instead they have addresses on Mountain Chalet, Cottage Creek, Mill Creek Drive, or Country Lane—“neighborhoods” they call home.

Each neighborhood has a full kitchen with cherry cabinets and black appliances similar to our own kitchens at home. Each has a dining room and living room space with a fireplace to be enjoyed by the 28 residents who live in each of the four neighborhoods. Residents direct their own care by deciding when they want to get up, what they want to eat, and how they wish to bathe. They watch staff cook meals, help bake cookies, and enjoy meaningful activities.

While this sounds normal in our own homes, unfortunately it has not been normal for long-term care living. But a culture-change movement is slowly transforming long-term care, and in Johnson County we are proud to watch this transformation happen at JCNC as its administrators and staff lead by example.

Through GERTI, the nursing center has become a catalyst for tours, education, and best practices to help other organizations succeed. In 2008, JCNC and GERTI received two awards for their efforts in improving aging and long-term care. The Kansas Ombudsman Award of Excellence, presented to only one organization in Kansas, went to JCNC/GERTI in May. And at the Governor’s Conference on Aging Services, also in May, JCNC received the PEAK (Promoting Excellent Alternative in Kansas) Award.

GERTI began offering classes in October 2003 and has since provided educational opportunities to more than 1,532 students from 188 organizations. The Advanced Education in Long-term Care course, offered each month in Olathe, is open to all Johnson County health care organizations; many send staff every month. The course is for staff at all levels, and it focuses on transforming institutional health care organizations into person-directed care models. With a Workforce Enhancement grant from the Kansas Department on Aging, GERTI offers the same course throughout Kansas.

GERTI’s success and innovation to improve services in long-term care has been championed across the country as CEO KJ Langlais and GERTI director Chris Osborn make presentations at national conferences.

JCNC and GERTI embrace education and clinical collaboration partnerships with Johnson County Community College, the Olathe School District, the Workforce Partnership Center in Overland Park, Brown Mackey College, the University of Kansas Nursing School, the University of Missouri–Kansas City, and the KU School of Social Welfare.

Johnson County government also remains a partner with the Johnson County Nursing Center, which has roots dating back to the mid-1860s. Last year, the Johnson County Board of County Commissioners authorized a 20-year contract with Friends of the Johnson County Nursing Center, Inc., to operate JCNC in the annual amount of \$800,000 plus reimbursement for utilities and maintenance. The terms of the new contract are subject to review by the board every five years.

The success of JCNC and GERTI can be attributed to the ongoing partnership with Johnson County and the ability to be innovative and do the right thing for those they serve. In January 2003, when Friends of JCNC became a nonprofit, the center had just 82 residents. Today the licensed capacity has increased to 112, and at times there are waiting lists. Growth and change do not come easy or without cost; however, in the end, doing the right thing always proves beneficial.

The success and dreams of the nursing center and GERTI do not stop now. They hope someday to break ground on a new campus, creating a model for aging in place called Lifetime Apartments. They believe that, regardless of the payer source (more than 85 percent of residents receive Medicaid), every human being who needs services deserves to live with dignity and autonomy.

Thanks to the professionals and volunteers who make JCNC a place we can all call home.

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