

Senior living communities consider how to be more diverse, inclusive, accessible

SPECIAL TO THE RBJ | CAURIE PUTNAM

THE NATION'S SENIOR POPULATION is the largest and most diverse in history, according to the most recent census data from the U.S. Census Bureau. It makes sense, then, that the residential makeup of senior housing communities nationwide is more diverse than ever.

Locally, senior living communities are embracing this diversity of race, culture, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation and gender identity, while



Marcello

simultaneously learning and growing as best practices emerge and engagement with their residents on the topic continues to evolve. "In very recent years, we have begun to see more people with diverse backgrounds accessing our services than ever before," said Lisa Marcello, CFO/EVP, of Episcopal SeniorLife Communities. "This includes Black, Hispanic and Asian people, individuals who practice a faith other than Christianity, and members of the LGBTQ+ community – all groups of people who have typically shied away from accessing services or living in residential senior communities –

largely due to trust issues and a feeling of not-belonging."

Senior living marketing and advising company Love & Company's Diversity in Senior Living Communities report from 2018 showed that senior living residents desire more diversity within their communities. It also showed that the majority of senior living community leaders recognize the need to create a more diverse, welcoming and inclusive community.

At Episcopal SeniorLife Communities, the key to creating that sense of belonging is resident-driven programming that comes from a place of authenticity. One example of this was illustrated when a resident of the community, along with her daughter, presented her story of living in and ultimately leaving Germany when it was controlled by the Nazis to an audience at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Rochester.

"Our program staff made sure the program was accessible to all residents and many of the residents attended," Marcello said. "There was wonderful follow-up discussion around antisemitism and other prejudices. It created a wonderful opportunity to talk about personal experiences, and certainly was a way to build community together, which is what we want to do."

Another example was Episcopal SeniorLife's participation in the King for a Day program, a city-wide event organized by RochesterCares typically on or near Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

For several years pre-COVID, Episcopal SeniorLife partnered with Nazareth College to have students participate in an intergenerational discussion about civil rights, which was moderated by Nazareth professor Dr. Muhammad Shafiq, executive director in Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue.

"The discussion was aimed to increase the understanding of civil rights, identify current community challenges, and build bridges between generations," said Marcello, who noted senior leadership at Episcopal SeniorLife have been trained by the Rochester-based Exploring Racism Groups. They've also recently created a director of engagement and inclusion position they're looking to fill.

At Jewish Senior Life, Michele Schirano, senior vice president and administrator, of the organization's Jewish Home of Roch-



Schirano

ester, has seen the changing demographics firsthand. She started working for at the Jewish Home of Rochester thirty years ago as an LPN.

“At the time I thought you had to be Jewish to work here and live here,” said Schirano, who estimates about 90% of the building’s residents at the time were Jewish. “Now in the last five years about 40% of our population is Jewish – we have a very diverse population now and are committed to enhancing the quality of life and well-being for all, no matter your faith, ethnicity or orientation.”

Remaining committed to its roots – which date back to 1920 when the organization was founded as the Jewish Home for the Aged – is extremely important to Jewish Senior Life, but so too is celebrating the rich diversity of its current community.

“We are all about person-centered care and our staff getting to know people on an individual level,” said Christine Van Vessum, vice president of staff development and quality management for Jewish Senior Life, who notes this knowledge



Van Vessum

often leads to things like cultural meals and spirituality programs.

Jewish Senior Life also grows cultural competency among its staff by using virtual-reality, first-person immersive experiences from Embodied Labs to embody the diverse perspectives of their

residents. One such module called Trans Health and LGBTQ+ Aging allows staff to experience the perspective of older adults who identify as members of these groups to explore defining moments in their lifespan.

“Over the years the LGBTQ+ community has mainly stayed in the closet in senior living,” said Van Vessum, noting that this is a national trend, not unique to any certain senior living community. “We know it is really important to change that and the last couple of years we’ve worked really hard to work things into our training like SAGECare.”

SAGECare provides LGBTQ+ competency training and consulting on LGBTQ+ aging issues to service providers. Qualifying agencies receive national credentials that show they’ve completed various levels of training from the organization and to highlight the percentage of staff trained.

In 2021 over 80% of Jewish Senior Life’s staff completed SAGECare training and the organization continues to work on ongoing assessment, education and initiatives.

St. John’s – a Rochester senior living and care provider – was recognized by SAGE and the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (HRC Foundation) on its Long-Term Care Equality Index in 2021.

The initiative is designed to promote equitable and inclusive care for LGBTQ+ older adults in residential long-term care communities and evaluates long-term care communities based on the equity



Sweeney

and inclusion of their LGBTQ+ residents and patients. At the time, St. John’s was only one of 18 agencies in the country to have this distinction.

“One of the most important decisions older adults make is where to live and for the LGBTQ population, an added stress is finding a place that’s friendly and accepting,” said Nate Sweeney, VP of Skilled Services, St. John’s. “From Pride Week to featuring real LGBTQ residents in our marketing efforts to the welcoming culture we’ve created – we are proud of the thoughtful and deliberate efforts we have made to ensure our LGBTQ residents are treated inclusively and that we have culturally competent policies and practices in place.”

Other things St. John’s does to create an environment that welcomes and respects diversity, includes celebrating religious and cultural holidays through meals and events, ensuring artwork in the facility is inclusive and providing faith services in both English and Spanish.

“A crucial piece about supporting seniors is honoring their traditions and so much of the is steeped in religion and culture,” said Sweeney, who notes much of St. John’s diversity programming is resident driven. “We try to learn about each and every resident here and as we learn about each individual we create community.”