



Building bridges with families

Clear communications at admission reduces later complaints and concerns

By Deborah Bakti

In Ontario, about 50% of the resident population in long-term care homes changes every year, through relocation or because they pass away. This means every year, about half of your resident and family population are new admissions.

While we know that residents and families often find the transition stressful, so do your staff. These are residents and families that your staff don't know, need to learn about, and worry that they may not be able to satisfy. The family's knowledge and understanding of long term care is unknown, their emotions are high, and their expectations may be unattainable for the staff to meet. This is so prevalent that I've given it a name: Admissions Anxiety.

Admissions are a key process and a significant investment of time and resources. The average-size long-term care home may have one to two admissions every week. Across Ontario that means about 150 admissions every day. Long-term care homes and the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care are experiencing increased rates of family complaints. This is creating frustration for both the families as well as staff and management, who work tirelessly to provide the best possible care with limited funding and human resource shortages.

Through both traditional media channels and the explosion of social media, families of residents in long-term care are becoming increasingly exposed to "negative news" about long-term care that the media continue to perpetuate. These stories – no matter how biased or inaccurate – may be the only knowledge of the sector that families have to date. It's no wonder they are fearful and worried, and coming into the system feeling defensive and protective.

The admissions process is an emotional experience for your families and a key part of your operations. It's an opportunity to be intentional on how you make this critical first impression with your families. A strong and healthy beginning can

set the tone for the duration of that relationship. Using my experience as a former long-term care executive, and the wife of a long-term care resident, I created The Family Matters Program™ to help long-term care homes design an admissions experience (versus a transactional process) that contributes to a healthy and vibrant culture for residents, families, and staff.

In 2019, Extencicare Mississauga implemented The Family Matters Program. As with most homes, they were struggling with family complaints and the time constraints this created. Staff were feeling frustrated, sick time was being impacted, and they saw this as a welcome opportunity to take a fresh approach to the admissions experience, from both the family and staff perspective.

The Family Matters Program has three phases. The first is a review of the current admissions process to understand what's working and where gaps exist. We look at key touchpoints in the journey, from the staff, resident, and family perspectives through the lens of how it feels. This is an Experience Based Design approach using Emotion Mapping. It provides data that tells a story about what's working and what's not. The second phase looks at opportunities to re-design so we can be more intentional with the moments that matter. Finally, in the third phase we reinforce what we have co-designed (with frontline staff, families, residents, and staff) to embed it into the culture through checkpoints and training, iterating where necessary.

Extencicare Mississauga reports that since implementing the program, their staff spend significantly less time reacting to family issues and are receiving fewer complaints. Frontline staff also report they are less stressed and more engaged. In fact, of the 58 new admissions since starting this program, there have been zero complaints from new families. Here are a few things you can bring back to your home, to help ease the Admissions Anxiety for both your families and your staff.

Clarify and adjust expectations:

Be curious with your families to understand what they know about long-term care, and what their expectations are. For example, do they expect their loved one to receive 24/7 one-on-one care? Or that their calls will never go to voicemail? What matters most to them? Clarify up front



what they expect so that you can adjust their expectations as needed with education and insight. Explain how you can support them. Clarify expectations to align with the reality of your home. For example, it may not be possible for you to respond to non-urgent requests in 24 hours. Be honest and clear – avoid overpromising. Acknowledge that there will be small hiccups such as missing laundry. You may not get it right 100% of the time, but you want to resolve issues the best you can. Sometimes how you approach the situation versus the situation itself can go a long way in minimizing the misunderstandings and disappointments that can spiral into conflict, friction, and complaints. You want to build trust and respect with a relational approach.

Take the lead with your culture: We understand that admission to long-term care can be a stressful time for families. Sometimes we set ourselves up by allowing or tolerating behaviour that crosses a line. As you onboard your new families, and learn their expectations, also explain the culture of your home as a way of clarifying your expectations of them. Positively describe your home as one where staff and families treat each other with

mutual respect, and work as partners in care. Explain that when inevitable challenges occur (i.e., missing laundry, dining or activity options, or staff turnover) you've had great success working with families in a respectful way, as partners in care, to resolve the issue as best as possible. This sets a good tone for the way forward.

Listen for what matters; Ask your families how their admission experience felt. What do they remember? What did they appreciate, and what would they have liked changed? Be intentional with having touch points with your families between Admission Day and their Care Conference. You want to be supporting them as they are trying to figure out their new role as a family member. It can be as simple as asking them how they are feeling about this big life change, and how they are

adjusting. Make eye contact and be present with them so they feel your attention and that they matter to you. Ask your staff how they feel when a new resident and family move in. How can it be improved? What support would be helpful? Your families notice the attitude and approach of your team. Families want to feel validated that they made the right decision choosing your home. When your staff feel supported and cared for, they can be more present and positive with your residents and families.

As we learned at Extendicare Mississauga, involving all stakeholders, facilitating discussion, brainstorming ideas, and implementing a new approach can have a positive impact on your culture and your efficiency and productivity. **ITC1**

Deborah Bakti is a consultant who works with long-term care and retirement homes on building relationships with families. Her new book, *RECIPE for Empathy: Six Strategies to Transform Families into Fans in Seniors' Care*, is available on amazon.ca. You can find Deborah at www.deborahbakti.com

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