

# THE MORNING CALL

Use it for life.

## Nursing homes around the Valley seeking to make life better for residents

By Brian Callaway OF THE MORNING CALL

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The menu listed only two soup choices but Bobbi Combs was craving a third: New England clam chowder.

No problem. The staff soon had a steaming bowl of chowder on the table in front of her.

Such service would have been expected at Combs' favorite restaurant, but she wasn't there. She's in a nursing home, a place associated more with assembly-line meals delivered on sterile plastic trays than the off-menu soup Combs enjoyed last week.

"I think it's very important," the 72-year-old said as her lunch arrived. "It makes you feel special -- makes you feel like they care."

More and more, nursing homes such as the Phoebe Richland Health Care Center in Upper Bucks where Combs has been staying, are taking such steps to make residents' stays more enjoyable.

Improving meals has become one of the more popular facets of the "culture change" administrators have been pushing. Other area homes, such as Westminster Village in east Allentown and Gracedale in Northampton County, have spruced up dining rooms and expanded dining options.

And food is hardly the only thing some nursing facilities are changing to make residents feel more at home.

At the main Phoebe Home in Allentown, for instance, it's not uncommon to see a cat lolling about a nurses' station or visiting with favored patients. And residents have assigned street names to the halls where they live.

"We don't have units, we don't have wings," said Tracy Kleppinger Bozik, Phoebe's director of community relations. "We have neighborhoods."

The changes may not sound drastic, but officials say they help residents feel better about living in nursing homes.

Maria Burdette, a district manager for Cura Hospitality, the dining services provider that's been working with the Phoebe homes, said it's important to "deinstitutionalize" such facilities so residents have more freedom in how they live.

"It's a matter of choice," she said. "It's a matter of dignity."

Bozik said generational changes in how people view nursing homes is also a consideration.

"The baby boomers are coming, and they're not going to want the same nursing home their grandmother was in."

Larry Minnix, president of the American Association of Homes & Services for the Aging, said it's "extremely important from the marketing standpoint" for nursing homes to change how they provide services.

Nursing homes have traditionally offered "regulation-centered care," he said, rather than tailoring the services they offer to suit each individual resident.

Doing things such as improving meal options and giving residents more flexibility on when they get up in the morning and go to bed each night can encourage those people to start living more actively, he said, and even improve health in some cases.

It also may make nursing homes more inviting for family members, leading to more visits and better spirits among residents.

"You go in and it smells like fried chicken instead of cleaning products or soiled carpet, and you begin to see a beehive of activity going on," Minnix said. "You begin to feel better about the place, and the grandkids start to come, and it's just good marketing all around."

Kleppinger Bozik said making these types of changes isn't always easy. Some of that is of how buildings are set-up -- the larger Phoebe Home in Allentown has yet to fully implement the types of dining improvements found in the organization's smaller Bucks County facility, in part because those changes might require renovations.



Phoebe Richland Health Care Center dietary aids Pauline Colon (left) and Mary Schmiege prepare lunches for the facility's residents. (Harry Fisher/The Morning Call)

It can also be difficult because nursing homes, like other health-care facilities, have traditionally had a system for how things are done and by whom; the changes Phoebe and other homes are implementing force workers to take on unfamiliar roles to help meet residents' needs.

"Sure, it's a challenge at times," Bozik said, "but I think it also gives some employees a new sense of what they do."

What they're doing is getting high marks from Combs.

She's been in the Phoebe Richland home since last month, when she had hip replacement [surgery](#). She hopes to be well enough to return to her Souderton home soon.

This isn't her first time in such a facility, though. Last year, after shoulder surgery, she stayed in another home that she declined to name.

There, she said, the staff couldn't even fix a grilled cheese sandwich right and she spent most of her time in her room.

"I wanted to die," she said.

She finished her recuperation at the Phoebe Richland home , and was fine with returning this year after her recent surgery.

"The difference here is the difference of the staff," she said. "They're nice."

There are other benefits as well, which she was happy to expound on as she dug into her chowder.

"The food here is really good."