

Living Green

By Lee Thorsen

If the color green were a person, it would probably be very tired nowadays with all of the movements, vices, and terms associated with it. Has it finally found new life in a nursing home?



WILLIAM H. THOMAS, M.D.

The Green House® Project is a new type of nursing home for seniors. Some are saying that it is the next evolution in nursing homes. Dr. William H. Thomas, M.D., a geriatrician, founded the Green House Project along with the Eden Alternative®. The Eden Alternative is a model for cultural change within an existing nursing home while the Green House is a physical building that replaces the nursing home and employs the cultural changes found in the Eden Alternative.



THE SAME OLD WAY

The Medical Facilities Survey and Construction Act of 1954, along with the passage of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965, helped launch the unprecedented growth of the modern, medically based nursing home. Over 16,000 nursing homes exist in America today and many of them are in need of an overhaul. A typical large institution has 120 beds and is divided into units of 20-40 elders. Nursing homes are organized much like hospitals with steep bureaucracy and ridged schedules. "The mission of a typical nursing home is to feed, water, medicate, exercise, dress and bathe the people that they are responsible for," says Dr. Thomas. "In other words, it's about tasks. What needs to be done at what time. Green Houses are different, they put relationships first."

THE NEW HOME

Each Green House is designed to be a home for eight to ten elders and is blended into a neighborhood to look like any other home on the street. Within its doors is something spectacular. Instead of being centered around the cold and lifeless hospital model full of long corridors, medicine carts, nurses, doctors, sterile stainless steel, and precise schedules, the Green House is centered around the elder and focuses on creating a home. The Green House is not "home-like" as many nursing homes try to portray; it is an actual self-contained home. When you enter a Green House, you recognize all of the things you have in your own home; the smell of home cooking, laughing, most everyone gathered in common rooms being a family. Each elder has a private room with a private bathroom. There is a large central kitchen, a living room with a fireplace and a dining area that are within view of each private room.



WHO RUNS THE PLACE?

The traditional model of care is completely reversed from the Green House model. The traditional model is medically based and very hierarchical with administrators, doctors and nurses on top and the main caregivers and elders on the bottom. The main caregivers, often certified nursing assistants, along with the elders are in

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the center of the Green House model and the structure is very flat with the many disciplines (doctors, nurses, administrators, dieticians, etc) in supportive roles. A self-managed work team of caregivers called Shahbazim, staffs the Green House. Shahbazim is the plural form of Shahbaz. Taken from the ancient Persian word, Shahbaz is a mythological bird and literally translates to the King's Falcon. Of course, the "King" refers to our elders in this instance.

The Shahbaz of the Green House is the central figure in managing the household and does everything from cooking to cleaning to laundry. More importantly, they establish and nurture an ongoing relationship with the elder, which is one of the core missions of the Eden Alternative. Each Green House has its own rhythm, just like any home would have. Some Green Houses are early rising while others sleep in and stay up late while still others are a mixed bag. It's all about the rhythm of the household that the Shahbaz taps into and works with to create harmony.

EMPOWERING THE WORKER

Direct care workers are generally underpaid, overworked and undervalued in a traditional nursing home. They care for as many as 10 to 20 people and are moved around on shifts and floors, and don't get to know the individual residents. They are often disrespected from their supervisors and feel helpless in their job. It is not



surprising that there is nearly a 100% turnover rate for traditional nursing home workers over a one-year period.

Compare this to a less than 10% turnover rate for a Green House. The Green House Project organization provides nearly 150 additional hours of specialized training before a person can take on the role of a Shahbaz. The curriculum includes CPR, first aid, culinary skills, safe food handling, household operation and most importantly communication skills. The Green House model stresses the importance of clear communication among and between staff and residents.

WHAT ABOUT THE ELDERS?

We have a nice new home and great, motivated workers, but what about the elders? After all, that's what its all about anyway. Lela Jasper should know. After all, she has been a resident of The Green House located in Redford, Michigan at the Presbyterian Villages of Michigan since it first opened nearly five years ago. "I love it. It feels like home," says Lela Jasper.

The elders take part in almost all aspects of their care. From deciding when they want to wake up to when they want to go to bed and everything in between. Family and friends are encouraged to visit and stay the night if they wish. There are no medicine carts in the place as each private room has its own medicine cabinet filled with





the specific prescriptions required by the elder. House council meetings are held each week and include elders in the decision-making process. All of this adds up to giving the respect and dignity back to our elders - as it should be.

The University of Minnesota conducted the Tupelo Green House Study and found that residents had a higher quality of life, better health, and a better overall experience while living in a Green House. Tupelo, Mississippi was the first in the nation to build Green Houses in 2003.

THE FUTURE

There are 93 Green Houses in operation with another 150 in development in over 25 states. In Michigan, there are seven Green Houses. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded a grant to NCB Capital Impact's Community Solutions Group to support the development of 50 projects (one in each state) across the United States through the Green House Project. In 2003, the leadership at the Presbyterian Villages of Michigan took a bold step to invest in an unproven, yet innovative

replacement of the traditional medical model of nursing homes. In 2006, they were the first in the state to build a Green House.

They have two Green Houses at The Village of Redford location in Redford, Michigan. Thomas Hosinski, Vice President and Executive Director of The Village of Redford, says, "Green Houses just make sense. I've been involved in many facets of long term care and I believe that this approach is the future of nursing homes." Today, The Village of Redford serves as a national training site for other organizations that are building these innovative solutions to be the next generation nursing homes.

FYI

For more information on Green Houses, please visit www.thegreenhouseproject.org or www.pvm.org.