

Facilities make moves to adjust to older, active residents

Senior housing has become an option for later years, the mid-80s, not mid-70s

By SHEILA LIVADAS

The average age of new and current residents at Rochester-area independent living communities has risen in recent years, prompting senior-living administrators to adjust some amenities and services.

The days of seniors touring and relocating to the communities when they reach their mid-70s have faded.

"Now it seems like it's more mid-80s," says Jackie Stone, senior vice president of marketing and public relations for Jewish Senior Life.

As the G.I. Generation moves on to higher levels of care and makes way for the Silent Generation, leaders of independent living communities are fielding more questions about quality of life and efforts to treat residents holistically.

"Bingo doesn't just cut it anymore for them," says Donald Felter, president of senior housing at Unity Health System. "They're looking for more services, better value; they're looking for more choices and options than previous options residents in the past have."

Local statistics show that the region's population is graying, which appears to be a boon for providers of independent living.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly 103,600 Monroe County residents, or 13.9 percent of the total population, were 65 or older in 2010. Ontario County had 15.4 percent in the same age group, and Wayne County had 14.3 percent.

Census Bureau estimates for 2012 had the ranks of seniors in that age bracket rising in all three counties, with Monroe County at 14.7 percent, Ontario County at 16.6 percent and Wayne County at 15.5 percent.

Various factors have caused an increase in the average age of current residents at Jewish Senior Life's the Summit at Brighton and at other local independent living communities.

"As a community ages, the people living there are living longer because they're eating well. They have less stress; they have less responsibilities. People ... go to the doctor more regularly," Stone says. "So your population ages because they live there longer."

At Cherry Ridge in Webster, a part of St. Ann's Community, the average resident age has climbed from 82 to 86 since the community opened in 2005, says Michael Seelig, Cherry Ridge's administrator and vice president of housing. The community currently has 147 residents.

The challenge for independent living communities often boils down to accommodating both its existing residents and new, highly active ones.

"We've always tried to address emergency preparedness or emergency response, wellness programs, and things of that nature," Seelig says. "So we haven't really changed much because of the average age, other than there may be more people needing assistance."

To treat residents holistically, Cherry Ridge has developed programs, services and amenities around the seven dimensions of wellness: emotional, intellectual, physical, social/cultural, environmental, occupational and spiritual. The community's activities range from cooking classes to outings for events at Eastman Theatre.

"I would say 15 years ago it was (only about) making sure we addressed transportation, security, housekeeping and things of that nature, which are still important," Seelig says.

He adds: "(Residents) want to still be involved in the social interaction with each other, and also they want to be involved in the cultural events going on, but they also want to be intellectually challenged."

Women have been roughly 75 percent of Cherry Ridge's residents since the community's opening. The presence of couples has grown over the years, and now they are 28 percent of residents.

"If anything, it's testament of the fact that they're realizing that as a couple that there's some major benefits, as far as moving into a community rather than waiting until something major happens to one or the other," Seelig says.

As the average age has risen at the Summit at Brighton, fewer residents have brought their cars to the community. That has meant adding drivers and vehicles with grab bars to the community's fleet, Stone says.

Women represent roughly 66 percent of Summit residents, and the number of couples has grown over the years. Eighty-six seniors live at the community.

Independent living residents typically have a broad range of interests, administrators say. Recent cultural and social events for Summit residents, for example, have included on-site piano recitals by Eastman School of Music students, a Wizard of Oz-themed picnic and a backstage tour of Geva Theatre Center.

"A lot of residents today are concerned about their fitness, so we expanded the fitness room, and we do have quite a few people who swim in the pool," Stone says.

Seniors who wait for a health crisis to occur before seriously considering independent living options usually find the stress of moving and getting acclimated to new surroundings challenging.

"It's an emotional decision even when you're healthy," Stone says.

The average resident age at the Villages at Unity independent living community in Greece is 86, Felter says. When he started working for Unity 15 years ago, the average age of people served by the health system in independent living was 82, he adds.

"We've also seen folks coming in older," Felter says. "And unfortunately, when they look at independent (living) communities, they're coming in on more of a need basis. So the majority of the folks moving in either lost a spouse, had a stroke or just health-related issues, where managing the house and everything is just too much for them."

The Villages at Unity, which just completed a \$20 million renovation, has roughly 300 residents, 70 percent of whom are women. Couples represent a growing cohort at the community, Felter says.

Residents' rising age was a trend that the lion's share of local independent living communities planned for, Felter says.

"And honestly, there's more choices for the consumer out there besides just independent communities," he says. "They've got more choices to be able to bring services in their home or apartment."

Recent research supports the idea that more seniors across the country are feeling more confident and less worried about their financial readiness and options for retirement.

According to a 2013 Gallup survey, 52 to 55 percent of respondents aged 84 to 91 agreed that they have more than enough money to live as they please. Concern about having spent too much money in the past dropped off among baby boomers and declined sharply for those in the late 60s through age 87.

More services exist for aging in place at home, but many prospective residents at Rochester-based St. John's Meadows and Brickstone do not rely on them, with the exception of housekeeping, says Paul Bartlett, vice president of senior housing.

The average age at St. John's Meadows and Brickstone, where roughly 500 seniors reside, is between 80 and 83, Bartlett says. Despite their advanced age, residents clamor for technology-related amenities, which is a major change from years past.

"Ten, 20 years ago, basic cable—they were more than happy with," he says.

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