

Despite pandemic, wellness remains a mainstay in senior living communities

By **ANDREA DECKERT**

Wellness has been playing an increasingly important role at senior living facilities, and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted its popularity and importance, field experts say.



Theiss

“Wellness has evolved into such an important part of our community,” says Lloyd Theiss, executive director of The Highlands at Pittsford.

When Theiss started working at the community some 15 years ago, there was not as much of a focus on wellness.

Around 2008, however, demand for such programs was growing and The Highlands at Pittsford began a strategic effort to increase its offerings and develop a robust wellness program, he explains.

“It was really gaining popularity,” Theiss says of the increased interest in wellness. “People started becoming very proactive with their health.”

Wellness has also become a focus for health insurers, Theiss notes, with many insurance companies offering benefits to those who take an active role in wellness initiatives.

Theiss says the senior living community embraces the seven dimensions of wellness, an approach endorsed by the International Council on Active Aging that recognizes that wellness extends beyond exercise and healthy eating.

The seven dimensions are: social; intellectual; physical; emotional; occupational; environmental; and spiritual. The Highlands at Pittsford offers programming geared toward all seven areas, and a major goal is on keeping residents connected to others.

“It’s woven into the fabric of all we do,” he says.

Among its offerings are learning opportunities through the University of Rochester. The Highlands at Pittsford is a UR affiliate, and, because of this, the community is able to hold regular lectures and discussions presented by UR faculty members. Topics have included modern American poetry, Rochester history and the keys to a healthy heart.

The pandemic has created some challenges for providing its wellness programs, Theiss notes, but the community has been able to make accommodations, such as offering virtual programs and reducing class sizes.

The community is always looking for ways to add wellness offerings. For example, the Highlands at Pittsford has partnerships with St. John Fisher College and Nazareth College where students in the health sciences programs there interact with residents at the senior community.

Theiss notes these students often have new ideas for ways to keep the focus on wellness.

Even with vaccines for COVID-19 becoming available, Theiss says the



Photo provided

A rendering of the new patio at The Summit at Brighton. The space will be used for exercise classes as well as outdoor dining and entertainment.



Photo provided

The Summit at Brighton is working on creating a community garden after an increased interest from residents in tending to the raised garden beds.

community will continue to exercise caution and focus on safety.

He says the community will look at more outdoor activities that focus on wellness and allow for social distancing moving forward.

Despite the challenges, wellness will continue to play an integral role, he says.

“I see it being embraced more than ever,” Theiss says. “People are anxious to get back to their routines. They are really passionate about it.”

Amy Cavalier, communications coordinator for DePaul Adult Care Communities, says a focus on wellness and socialization opportunities has always been a priority and is important to resident satisfaction.

“Lifelong learning activities, exercise, meals and nutrition, intergenerational programs linking youth and older adults and maintaining family connections have always been part of our approach to providing the highest quality care to those we serve,” she says.

The pandemic has required modification of visitation protocols, she notes, but residents have been able to connect with loved ones through phone calls or handwritten letters, as well as video chats using a com-

puter, smartphone or tablet.

The organization has successfully adapted to the challenges posed by the pandemic, providing a host of socially distanced wellness opportunities and ways to keep connected and engaged, she notes.

This year, DePaul is investing in an engagement technology system that encourages increased engagement and higher quality interactions for seniors. The system will include education and lifelong learning, games requiring memory, strategy and skill, music therapy, virtual travel and cultural enrichment and spirituality connections, she says.

Susan Bussey, senior vice president of housing at Jewish Senior Life, agrees that wellness plays an integral role at The Summit at Brighton, which is the independent living option at Jewish Senior Life. There are some 95 residents there.

“Wellness plays a huge role in our residents’ lives,” she says.

Bussey has seen a shift in the importance of wellness over the years.

“Eight years ago, there wasn’t the demand for fitness and wellness that there is today,” she says.

She, too, notes wellness is a concept that goes beyond physical activity. It also includes areas such as emotional, social and spiritual engagement. The Summit at Brighton specifically focuses on providing activities that address each of those ar-

reas, she adds.

COVID-19 has meant the senior living community had to make some adjustments with its wellness programs, Bussey says. To meet social distancing requirements and continue to focus on safety, classes were held over Zoom, allowing residents to participate from their apartments.

“We found creative ways to keep programs going,” she notes.

The organization also partnered with the Jewish Community Center to provide virtual classes.

Bussey says the wellness component there is driven by the residents and what offerings they want to see.

“They are really steering the ship,” she says.

Not only do residents join wellness activities, they even lead them at times, she says. There are resident-led education programs that include those led by residents who were doctors, artists and business executives.

Additional wellness activities are being planned for later this year.

Bussey says the senior living community has been developing an outdoor multi-purpose space where residents will be able to participate in a range of activities, including various exercise programs and meditation, as well as dining and entertainment options.

Work on the outdoor space began in early 2020 and was slightly delayed due to COVID, but the space is on track to be used when the weather gets warmer, Bussey says.

The space will also feature a community garden for residents. The decision was made due to the increased popularity of the raised garden beds residents have been tending to over the past year.

She says that wellness activities are as important as ever, noting residents are finding ways to interact while following all the safety protocols required as a result of the pandemic.

“They are finding ways to get together and making time to socialize with each other,” Bussey says.

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