MAKING RESIDENT AND FAMILY COUNCILS

Successful

IN ASSISTED LIVING
The National Center for Assisted Living’s (NCAL) “Making Resident and Family Councils Successful in Assisted Living” is written to disseminate information about resident and family councils to assisted living providers nationally.

The concepts and terms used in this document may vary from state to state. They are provided as a framework to promote a general understanding of resident and family councils in the assisted living context. The content in this document is not to be considered as “standards of care.”

About 1 million people live in assisted living communities across the nation. Assisted living embraces a philosophy of person-centered care while providing assistance with physical activities and health-related needs. Assisted living communities also strive to meet the cultural, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual well-being of residents.

The assisted living profession continues to grow and evolve, as do NCAL’s perspectives on the changing profession.

**Resident Councils**

Resident councils are one method that assisted living communities can use to continue delivering a high level of quality care and services to residents. Resident councils are an avenue for open communication between the community’s management and its residents. Council meetings provide a forum for dialogue among residents, staff, and management about operations and policies in the assisted living community that affect the daily lives of residents. The assisted living community is home to residents, and their participation in a resident council gives them opportunities to provide meaningful input. Giving residents this forum enables them to maintain a level of control over their daily lives.

A resident council is an organized group of residents who live within an assisted living community. Participation in a resident council is voluntary.

Typically, a resident council meets on a regular basis to keep the exchange of information open between residents and staff. Council members determine the content of their meetings. For example, resident councils can plan activities, provide feedback on services, or disseminate information to fellow residents about changes occurring within the assisted living community. Policy changes are often discussed, and guest speakers can use this forum to educate residents about topics of interest to them.

It is important for staff to explain the purpose and importance of the resident council when residents begin living in a community and encourage their active participation whenever possible.
SIZE AND STRUCTURE
Resident councils vary in size and structure. Some smaller assisted living communities may invite each resident to participate in the council meetings. Larger communities may choose to have liaisons representing different parts of the community (such as neighborhoods) to ensure all parts of the community are represented. If there are several liaisons representing different parts of an assisted living community, it is important to remember that the council represents the total community, and they have an obligation to communicate and funnel the decisions and discussions of the council meetings back to the residents they represent.

The resident council might choose to create an executive council that may consist of officers such as a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. Others may choose not to have any governance structure. The important factor is to have a mechanism for the resident council to communicate with management and all residents.

ROLE
The role of resident councils varies depending on participation, abilities of residents, size of the assisted living community, and organizational structure. The important thing to take into consideration is the effectiveness of the council.

Some responsibilities of the council may include:
- Determining the governance structure;
- Soliciting comments, suggestions, and questions from residents;
- Directing and managing resident council meetings;
- Taking minutes or notes of all meetings and making sure they are communicated to all residents;
- Suggesting ideas for activities in conjunction with the activities department; and
- Acting as a liaison between the residents and the management.

MANAGEMENT PARTICIPATION
Management should always be open to listening to comments and suggestions from the council. Resident council meetings should be friendly, attentive, and encourage open discussions. Some states have regulations regarding resident councils, and these guidelines should be followed.

Staff attendance at meetings should be determined by the resident council and in accordance with the community’s culture. Resident councils can decide whether the council meetings are invitation only, or are open for any department staff or management to attend. Resident councils may request that particular staff members attend.

Whatever the determination, when staff attend council meetings it is important for staff to remember that council meetings are designed for residents to have an opportunity to ask questions and discuss issues with their peers before bringing them to management. Sometime issues are resolved by the residents within the meeting, and this empowers residents to work together in identifying solutions or compromises.
MEETING NOTICES AND AGENDAS

Resident council meeting notices (date, time, location) should be clearly posted in a common area(s) well in advance of the meetings and included in community newsletters or other means of communication with residents.

Resident councils may have an agenda that includes the following:

I. Introductions: This presents a great opportunity to welcome new residents and say goodbye to those who may be leaving. It also allows residents a refresher on everyone’s names (name tags should be offered).

II. Announcements: Upcoming events, staffing changes, administrative changes or reminders, guest speakers, etc.

III. Old business: Make sure every suggestion or complaint has been addressed from the previous meeting.

IV. New business: Open discussion of all areas of operation within the community. If community staff are present, this can be an ideal time for them to report on new developments in activities, policies, services, or other topics.

Some examples of discussion areas are:

- Activities
- Administration
- Dining Services
- Housekeeping/Laundry
- Maintenance
- Nursing
- Wellness Services

Resident council meetings should cover all areas of operation within a community. It is important to break down the specific areas so that the conversations stay on track.

HANDLING COUNCIL FEEDBACK

After the council meeting is completed, a member of the council should present the suggestions and feedback to the community’s administrator/director either through a face-to-face meeting or in a written document. It is important for the resident council to have a formal mechanism with the community’s management for delivering its feedback and suggestions. Whether it is an in-person meeting or the council submits a document, the community’s administrator/director should take notes that record the resident council’s feedback.

Once the resident council registers its feedback with management, it is important for the administrator/director to discuss the feedback with the community’s staff. Management may keep a record of its actions in order to track the progress or resolution.
Staff follow-up regarding issues and concerns raised during resident council meetings is very important to residents as this indicates that their issues are not being ignored. Information about progress or resolution of an issue raised at a resident council meeting should be addressed at the next meeting (e.g., old business) or communicated via other means to the residents.

MANAGEMENT AND STAFF PARTICIPATION

Occasionally, the resident council may request that a department head or staff member be present when their individual departments are being discussed. This may precipitate immediate answers to the residents. Management and staff should remember, however, that it is acceptable to respond to resident questions by saying, “I don’t know the answer at the moment,” followed by a deadline for follow up. The purpose of attendance at the council is to meet the needs of the residents in a fair and diplomatic manner.

Some resident councils may choose to be actively involved in fund raising, volunteer programs, or off-site events. It is important that the administrator/director be kept informed of the projects the resident council is involved in to ensure safety, security, and appropriateness of these activities. Management may also offer assistance with the planning, transportation, and supervision of these activities.

Depending on the physical needs of the residents, councils may request a staff member or volunteer to type the minutes or notes from a resident council meeting. If that occurs, the resident council should review and approve the minutes or notes before they are presented to management to ensure that the council’s discussions were clearly and correctly expressed. Meeting minutes should be made available to all residents, especially those residents who were not able to attend the meeting.

BENEFITS OF RESIDENT COUNCILS

Effective resident councils enhance communication, relay information, and identify issues within the community. Councils also present new ideas, encourage feedback, and promote friendship.

In addition, resident councils are beneficial to those individual residents who are reticent to raise issues to management on their own. Resident councils can provide a friendlier environment for communicating change and provide residents dignity in an area where their concerns are taken seriously by their peers. As the residents take an active part in their homes and the rules governing their communities, their quality of life improves, and satisfaction increases.
A family council is an organized group of relatives or friends of assisted living residents that meet on a regular basis in order to provide feedback to management about the assisted living community’s services and care. It is common to hold the family council meetings on a monthly basis and within the assisted living community. While the primary purpose of a family council is for families, as a group, to provide suggestions about care and services for their loved ones, it also enhances communication with the community staff and offers peer support for the relatives and friends of residents.

Family council meetings offer the opportunity for open conversation and direction and provide information families and friends may need. Although family councils may offer support, it is important that family councils do not turn into support groups. Support groups are important for some people but they should be separate from the family council. This group is intended to enhance communication, education, and information. The goal is to give families and friends a voice in decisions that affect them and their family members residing in the community.

MANAGEMENT AND STAFF PARTICIPATION
Family councils can determine, depending upon the community’s culture, whether staff members attend their meetings. Effective family councils allow their members to share issues amongst themselves, and then determine as a group the items, feedback, or suggestions that will be submitted to the community’s administrator/director.

Family members may suggest that a staff member run the council meetings. It is suggested that the community’s manager recommend that the family council not use a staff member. When a staff member is leading the council it might inhibit some family members from openly expressing themselves and discourage attendance. If a council chooses to have a staff member lead the meeting, then it may be helpful to provide a suggestion box so that family members who do not want to express themselves have a way of providing direct feedback.

Most family councils meet independently and produce a written report that contains meeting notes for management. The family council may request a staff liaison to answer questions or explain situations during their meeting.

It is suggested that the minutes or notes from the family council meeting be made available to family members who were not able to attend. Family councils can present a unified voice on behalf of residents, particularly for residents who are not always able to verbalize their issues. It is important that the family council members recognize the entire assisted living community and not just those residents of family members in attendance. Family councils should operate as a partnership between management and family members.
One challenge that assisted living communities face in establishing and maintaining family councils is adequate family participation. Most families have limited time and may need encouragement from staff to attend meetings on a regular basis.

Staff follow-up about issues and concerns raised during family council meetings is very important to its members. Information about progress and/or resolution of an issue should be addressed at the next meeting (e.g., old business) or communicated via other means to family members.

CONCLUSION

Residents and family members can be an integral part of an assisted living community’s success. Resident and family councils are important communication links between these groups and the assisted living management and staff. Management can use councils as an invaluable part of a community’s quality improvement program or the risk management program.

It is beneficial for the management to present and train all staff about the important roles family and resident councils play in the daily operation of an assisted living community. This will help ensure that staff members do not feel intimidated by resident and family councils and more clearly understand the importance of their feedback. Staff can use the feedback from councils to have a fuller understanding of their residents’ needs and preferences.

Residents and family members benefit because council meetings help them make the assisted living community their own home. Assisted living communities that have regular council meetings have an added opportunity for ongoing communication between the community staff and its residents and families. While there is no single “right way” of holding resident or family councils, NCAL believes that communities that support these councils will find them rewarding and beneficial for all involved.

Acknowledgement

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National Center for Assisted Living

The National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL) is the assisted living voice of the American Health Care Association. NCAL is dedicated to serving the needs of the assisted living community through national advocacy, education, networking, professional development, and quality initiatives. NCAL’s proactive, national focus on assisted living legislation is backed by the strongest and most influential long term care advocacy team in the country. NCAL members know that their voices will be heard by the national policy makers and regulators who continually seek to influence the future of assisted living.

In addition to national advocacy, NCAL supports state-specific advocacy efforts through its national federation of state affiliates. NCAL state affiliates work to create local education, advocate on behalf of assisted living providers, and provide the direct, ongoing support their assisted living members need to improve quality and grow their businesses.