

Eldercare facilities can benefit from going green, Covenant shows

Focus is on environmental safeguards and respect for the Earth

Although eldercare facilities don't have the waste-generating, energy-intensive operating rooms, laboratories or the large pharmacies that their acute care hospital cousins do, they still have plenty of opportunities to save energy and reduce their trash stream.

That was the thrust of a recent CHA-hosted webinar on environmentalism in long-term care facilities, presented by "green" experts from eldercare facilities in Covenant Health Systems of Tewksbury, Mass.

Covenant's Nancy Mulvihill said in an interview that like acute care hospitals, long-term care facilities "operate around the clock and have high electricity and water usage. They can use environmentally safe materials and adopt sustainable food policies" — and those within Covenant do.

Mulvihill is Covenant vice president of communications and chair of Covenant's systemwide environment committee. She was one of four representatives of Covenant who presented the "Going Green in Eldercare" webinar in late February (a consultant also was a presenter). Covenant owns, manages or affiliates with 3 hospitals and 21 long-term care campuses around New England.

A theme of the webinar was that while long-term care facilities may have smaller budgets, smaller staffs and smaller campuses than their acute care counterparts, they can still achieve significant financial, social and environmental benefits from investing in green technologies and promoting Earth-friendly practices.

During the webinar, the Covenant presenters explained how the system has been greening its facilities — with the backing of top executives, since around 2004. Each facility has a green team with representatives from a cross section of departments. One of those people, usually someone in environmental services, also serves on a Covenant environmental committee. That committee helps the facilities plan their strategies and share what's working.

Saving water and energy, eliminating the use of Mercury, sourcing food locally and cutting waste are prime goals. Each facil-

ity assesses its performance and reports its progress following a methodology that allows for a systemwide report card in some areas.

Webinar presenters detailed how the approach works at Covenant's 92-unit Youville Place Assisted Living Residence in Lexington, Mass.; and Covenant's Mary Immaculate Nursing/Restorative Center in Lawrence, Mass., which has 231 skilled nursing beds, 22 short-term rehab units and an Alzheimer's care unit.

To determine how best to reduce their energy and water use, both Youville and Mary Immaculate first worked with their utility providers to get free audits of their electrical systems, the energy-efficiency of their buildings and the efficiency of their water usage. The assessments helped them identify ways to reduce consumption. They started with "low-hanging fruit," to build momentum, including installing energy-efficient lighting, lighting activated by motion sensors and water-efficient sprayers in kitchens.

They then turned to more advanced measures, most notably the use of cogeneration in their physical plants. Cogeneration uses a heat engine or power station to simultaneously generate both electricity and heat. Heat captured in this process is used to warm campus buildings. This allows the facility to use less electricity from the power grid.

Mary Immaculate estimates it is going to pay off its investment in installing cogeneration technology in about two years and that it now saves about \$66,000 per year in energy costs. It estimates it has reduced its generation of carbon dioxide by 346 tons per year. Youville estimates cogeneration has saved it \$127,000 per year and reduced its carbon dioxide output by 783 tons. The



Sr. Helen Sikorski, SGM, a resident of Youville Place Assisted Living Residence, spreads mulch on Earth Day.

estimates of reduced carbon dioxide use are based on the fact that the facilities are now using less electricity from the power plant and from the power grid, thereby reducing the amount of carbon dioxide emitted in the power generation process.

Mary Immaculate and Youville also reap revenue from cogeneration since it creates alternative energy credits. An energy efficiency company calculates the alternative energy credits through metering. That company then sells those credits to a utility company, which then pays the facilities for those credits. Estimated revenue for the year for both facilities is \$47,000 a year.

To eliminate Mercury or to dispose of it more responsibly, Mary Immaculate and Youville recycle fluorescent lightbulbs — which contain Mercury. Both facilities changed out their Mercury thermometers and thermostats for environmentally friendly substitutes. They have policies to avoid purchasing products containing

Mercury.

As part of an effort toward ecologically sound food practices, Mary Immaculate and Youville are discontinuing the use of Styrofoam, purchasing locally grown produce and some meats and increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables served to residents (produce is viewed as more Earth-friendly compared to meat, which requires more energy in production).

And to reduce waste, Mary Immaculate and Youville use a combination of approaches, including donating unneeded equipment, increasing their recycling and composting. Mary Immaculate now recycles 28 percent of its waste; and Youville, 59 percent. Since the cost of disposing of trash in a landfill is higher than the other disposal methods, Mary Immaculate estimates it saved nearly \$5,000 last year, and Youville, nearly \$6,500.

The webinar presenters said that it is challenging to “go green” because the shift

involves widespread behavior change, but they said they’ve been able to make progress because of leadership support and because they’ve been intentional about promoting the facilities’ achievements — and this builds excitement among employees and residents.

They’ve also tried to find ways to make greening fun, such as encouraging residents to garden — and then to consume their crops.

Speaker Joanne Scianna, chief operating officer of Youville, said that while it’s been rewarding to count the savings and efficiency improvements flowing from sound environmental policies, there’s an even more compelling reason to go green in eldercare: “It is the right thing to do.”

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