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Outdoor Environments in Assisted Living Facilities

Can Improved Outdoor Spaces Lead to Cost Benefits through Increased Word-of-Mouth Referrals?

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The senior population (aged 65 and over) "is projected to increase from the current level of 40 million to about 72 million by the year 2030, according to the U.S. Census Bureau." Over the past several decades, a higher percentage of this growing senior population has opted for assisted living arrangements as an alternative to traditional nursing home communities. The physical environment of assisted living facilities significantly influences the "functional and psychosocial" well-being of residents.

Word-of-mouth referrals are a powerful recruiting resource

Increased time spent outdoors corresponds to more physical activity, reduced stress, improved mood, and longevity. Therefore, "spending time outdoors is a vital resource for remaining healthy in old age." However, assisted living facilities tend to focus more on ornamental landscaping than on functional

outdoor spaces in which residents can interact with each other and nature. The design of outdoor spaces greatly influences how much time residents choose to spend outdoors, as discovered by a team of researchers including Texas A&M University's Geoffrey Booth and Susan Rodiek.

FINDINGS

The researchers investigated 68 assisted living facilities in Houston, Chicago, and Seattle, which are three of the country's major emerging urban areas. 1,140 volunteer residents completed a survey on outdoor amenities of their communities. The most significant design problems reported by residents were:

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SATISFACTION WITH OUTDOOR SPACES AND REFERRALS

Resident satisfaction with outdoor spaces



Increased time spent outdoors



Improved mood of residents



Increased willingness to refer assisted living facility

The similarity of the following figures highlights the connection between *satisfaction with outdoor spaces and resident mood*:

- 147 average number of minutes/week spent outdoors by residents "very satisfied" with outdoor spaces
- 150 average minutes/week outdoors for residents who felt better after being outdoors
- 33 average minutes/week outdoors for residents "somewhat or not at all satisfied"
- 31 average minutes/week outdoors for residents who felt the same or worse after being outdoors

1. Doorways that were difficult to pass through
2. Poorly designed or maintained walkways
3. Inadequate seating
4. Lack of shade

Residents gave high ratings to outdoor areas with adequate space, nature elements, social areas, and freedom of movement.

Researchers observed a strong link between satisfaction with outdoor areas and whether residents identified as "feeling better" after being outdoors. Furthermore, 97% of residents who were "very satisfied" with outdoor spaces were willing or likely to refer the assisted living facility, as opposed to 31% of moderately satisfied residents.

IMPLICATIONS

The majority of unsatisfactory outdoor design features can be renovated relatively cheaply using existing maintenance budgets and possibly a minor annual capital investment. These outdoor renovations tend to be less expensive than indoor remodeling and are less disruptive to facility routines; thus, outdoor renewal is a practical means of increasing the quality of assisted living facilities. Renovations can also be fairly simple:

- Flatter thresholds (for wheelchairs and walkers) and overhead door closers requiring less opening force
- More seat cushions for comfort and additional seating to decrease walking distance before resting
- Installation of trees, vines, and awnings for shade
- Improved, repaired, and better-maintained sidewalks

Because residents who are very satisfied with their outdoor spaces tend to spend more time outdoors and feel better overall, they are more likely to refer their assisted living community. Word-of-mouth referrals are a powerful resource for recruiting new residents; the researchers determined that improving outdoor spaces can attract 4% more new residents each year. This corresponds to decreased marketing costs and an annual \$170,000 revenue increase for a 100-resident community. Moreover, improved outdoor spaces can increase residents' well-being and quality of life. Other potential benefits include reduced rates of staff burnout from the use of outdoor spaces for respite from stress, improved outdoor areas for visitors, and a higher level of resident socializing.



Sample outdoor space - Retrieved from eraliving.com



Sample outdoor space- Retrieved from thousandoaks.belmontvillage.com

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