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How a Service Coordinator Can Make Homeless Elders Feel at Home

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Leading Age. by Geralyn Magan. Oct 23, 2013

It takes time to recover emotionally from years of chronic homelessness. For 35 formerly homeless older adults living at Merritt Crossing Senior Apartments in Oakland, CA, every day of that recovery period begins with a friendly wave from Resident Services Coordinator Anna Cheung.

The daily greeting comes without words. But it carries a powerful message to every Merritt Crossing resident who walks by Cheung's glass-enclosed office on their way to and from the building's front door.

"I wave to them and they wave back, and then we form a habit of waving at each other," says Cheung. "A year later, we are still waving."

The simple gesture reminds residents that they are finally settled and finally home, she says. This can be a hard message to accept for a 55-year-old who has been living on the streets for years.

"Some need at least 9 months to a year to really adjust to having a place of their own," says Cheung. "For many of them, this all seems unreal."

Satellite Affordable Housing Associates

Cheung has been service coordinator at Merritt Crossing since Satellite Affordable Housing Associates (SAHA) opened the building in 2012. Senior housing communities make up about half of SAHA's portfolio of 56 affordable housing properties, but Merritt Crossing is the only property with specific set-asides for formerly homeless elders. A similar property is now under development nearby.

Under the terms of Merritt Crossing's tax-credit funding agreement, formerly homeless older adults occupy half of the property's 70 apartments. A diverse group of residents -- including African Americans, monolingual Chinese speakers and natives of Korea, Vietnam, Nigeria, and the Philippines -- inhabits the other 35 units.

Welcoming Residents Home

When new residents arrive at Merritt Crossing, the first thing they do is meet with Cheung. That's when Cheung assesses each resident's service needs and offers assurances that Merritt Crossing is now the resident's permanent home. As long as the resident complies with the terms of the lease, he or she will never have to go back to the streets.

"I want them to feel welcome," says Cheung. "I am very fortunate because the other residents here want them to feel welcome too."

Residents roll out the welcome mat by sharing coffee each week in the building's community room. The same welcome mat is also on full display during the frequent community-wide pot luck dinners that have earned Merritt Crossing a reputation, at least within SAHA, as a very special community.

"That building is a really amazing building," says SAHA's Director of Housing Development Eve Stewart. "There is a tremendous sense of community. It is just a really joyful place to be. I'm not sure exactly how it is happening but everybody is blending really nicely."

Cheung sums up the building's secret to success with one word: food.

"Because I am Chinese, food is very important and I use it a lot," admits Cheung. "We have cross-cultural pot lucks where everyone brings a different ethnic food. I am very fortunate because our Chinese residents are great cooks, so they bring a lot of food to share."

Social Functions with a Purpose

Cheung encourages residents to organize and attend social functions so they will get to know one another and eventually begin watching out for one another. If a resident stops coming to morning coffee, for instance, Cheung wants other residents to notice and let her know about it.

"There is an old Chinese saying, 'No matter how many relatives you have, your closest nearby neighbors are actually more helpful than your distant relatives,'" says Cheung. "I use that saying to educate all residents that they should help each other out."

Merritt Crossing's social atmosphere also helps residents focus on something other than themselves, says Cheung. That therapeutic sense of connectedness is so strong that it now extends into the surrounding community.

For example, formerly homeless Merritt Crossing residents have cooked meals for clients of St. Mary's Center, which runs a winter homeless shelter where some of them once lived. Some residents join Cheung at local rallies in support of affordable housing. Others have become informal spokespersons for the homeless by sharing their stories with SAHA staff and board members, or by writing poems in a resident-managed publication called Merrittedly Speaking.

For Cheung, the outreach is important because it helps dispel the stereotypes about homelessness.

"Out of the 35 formerly homeless residents here, over 90% are doing extremely well," she says. "Homelessness isn't equal to an unsuccessful life. Homeless people can be very creative. When they tell their stories, it is very powerful. I hope (we can help) people to be more tolerant and more accepting."

Coordinating Services for the Formerly Homeless

Merritt Crossing's rich community spirit may help formerly homeless elders adjust to life off the streets. But it doesn't erase the serious problems that some of those residents bring with them to the housing development, says Cheung. It takes more traditional service coordination skills to address those challenges, which may include mental health and substance use issues.

If a new resident already has a case worker, Cheung encourages him or her to continue working with that person after moving to Merritt Crossing. If there isn't a case worker in the picture, however, Cheung refers residents to appropriate service providers in the community.

Cheung also keeps in close touch with all the building's residents so she'll know when things are going well, and when they're not. She makes a point of reminding some residents to take their medications or keep appointments with doctors and service providers. But she's careful not to overdo this part of the job.

"I often tell my clients that they are adults and they are responsible for their own behavior," she says. "I don't want them to rely on me too much."

Respecting the choices that some residents make -- even if they choose to forego needed services -- is an important part of Cheung's job, albeit a frustrating one.

"I try to be very direct and open about the need for services, but when people are not ready, they are not ready," she says. "I don't want to wait for a crisis to happen, but it is sometimes very difficult to know how to break through to them."

Cheung says her core beliefs help her remain patient in such instances.

"I believe that there is goodness in every one of us," she says. "I see goodness in each one of our residents and hopefully I can bring that out to them. Hopefully that changes them."

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