

Neighborhoods at St. Elizabeth offers seniors a warm, inviting residence

This is not your father's nursing home.

In fact, it's hard to realize that the Neighborhoods at St. Elizabeth really is a nursing home, since it totally lacks that institutional touch.

A pleasant hearth room that resembles a great room - complete with fireplace and flat-screen TV - replaced what was once a nursing station, and the Silestone counters and designer tile in the bathrooms give the feel of a high-end home. The doorways to individual rooms are styled to look like the front door of a row home, framed in molding and flanked by a mailbox, wall sconce and attractive address plate.

Each of the five floors is a neighborhood and boasts its own kitchen wafting the homey smell of coffee brewing. The colors are warm, and rooms are bright and inviting. But it's not just the designer touches that are different - residents have a real say in how their lives will be lived here just as they would in their own home.

A visitor is surprised to find residents of one neighborhood enjoying a happy hour, complete with beer and wine.

"Can you have alcohol in your home?" asks Christine Mour, administrator of St. Elizabeth Rehabilitation and Nursing Center, which totals 162 beds in its five neighborhoods and is run by Catholic Charities.

That attitude - that residents should enjoy the comforts and activities they once knew at home - defines their stay at St. Elizabeth.

"We treat people's disease processes, but those disease processes don't define them," Mour says.

That's why the staff allows one resident, who loves to nap on the sofa, to stretch out on the sofa in the hearth room. That's why five meals a day are served, not three, and those who like to sleep late can enjoy a brunch. That's why staff members ask residents, "What would you like to do today?" That's why physical therapy is done not in a closed room, but in a wide, bright hallway lined with windows, where residents can look outside as they exercise.

"Part of what we're after is getting in touch with people's rhythms of life," says Mour.

Marie Gibson, 85, is sitting in a wheel chair, lifting small weights and watching the sun dapple the hallway as occupational therapy assistant Jennifer Lewis sits with her.

Gibson says she likes the bright sun, but then she can't resist a bit of mock complaining. "Don't ask me about what I have to do," she says. "They're making me do a lot of stuff for an old lady."

She's been in rehabilitation at St. Elizabeth for five weeks but is looking forward to going home soon, and as she talks about it with Lewis, she works the weights a bit harder.

"We use the environment and the outdoors, the visual," Lewis says. "We work it into the rehab. People stand at the window, and in the spring we go outside."

Plans this spring call for the addition of a rehabilitation garden, filled with native plants.

For those with dementia or Alzheimer's, St. Elizabeth has a fully enclosed garden planted with non-toxic plants, where residents can safely enjoy views of downtown.

The neighborhood for residents with memory issues includes a nursery, equipped with a rocking chair, changing table and crib, for those who believe they're once again tending to infants. A nearby stimulation area has lights and music that the latest research shows soothe those with Alzheimer's. The staff is also working with a light box, which mimics sunlight's effects on the body.

The neighborhood is peaceful, not chaotic.

“The environment and what the staff is doing makes a huge difference,” Mour explains. The area is beautifully decorated, with laminate flooring that looks like hardwood.

“We were one of the people who benefited from the slow housing market,” Mour explained with a laugh.

The staff, dressed in regular clothes, move seamlessly among the patients. A nursing station is tucked discreetly into a nook in a hallway; much less space is required since the facility uses electronic medical records. Needed medical equipment, such as blood pressure cuffs and supplies, is easily accessible but out of sight in handsome wooden cabinets.

Instead of nurse managers, the neighborhoods are run by neighborhood guides who have varied backgrounds, such as recreational therapist and program director. They concentrate on creating a homelike atmosphere, a model that frees the nurses to focus on nursing. Residents attend regular meetings, where they have real input into their neighborhood.

Sister Eileen Davis, a Daughter of Charity, is a retired nurse who volunteers at St. Elizabeth.

“This is top-notch,” she said. “I think the attitude of the staff is crucial. If they can catch that this is home for [the residents] and they have choices, that’s what makes the difference. It’s how people are treated.”

After visiting St. Elizabeth, Bishop Mitchell Rozanski says, “Catholic Charities has taken seriously its motto to ‘Cherish the Divine Within.’ It was a joy to be able to visit St. Elizabeth on the beautiful Jenkins campus in southwest Baltimore and to witness not only the wonderful physical environment but to learn of the philosophy of care for the seniors who live there. Every aspect of care is well-planned to center on the needs of the residents. I know that St. Elizabeth will serve as a model for other senior care facilities as it provides great dignity, warmth and service to our seniors.”

St. Elizabeth was founded in 1927 as Jenkins Memorial Chronic Home for the Incurables.

“It makes you just want to run here, doesn’t it,” Mour says of the former name.

Elizabeth Jenkins had left an endowment with the archbishop to build a home for the impoverished sick. Run by the Daughters of Charity, at first it housed sick babies and children, and people with polio. As modern treatments evolved, its mission turned to taking care of seniors, and the name was changed to St. Elizabeth, for St. Elizabeth of Hungary, who ministered to the sick, elderly and poor. Catholic Charities began operating the facility in 1989.

It’s been totally rebuilt since 1927, but the new chapel, where Mass is said daily, incorporates the gorgeous stained glass windows from the original building. Today, about 66 percent of the residents use Medicaid to pay for their care.

“We are under-funded \$41 per day for each Medicaid elder,” Mour says. But Catholic Charities is committed to supplying the same high standards of care and comfort found in private, expensive continuing care communities.

“True to its mission, Catholic Charities has provided a home that cherishes the individual person with loving, dignified care,” Bishop Rozanski said.