

Safety, security are benefits to independent living

When considering the plusses of a continuing care retirement community, most individuals think in terms of cost, quality of life and access to round-the-clock health care, among other considerations.

What usually doesn't enter into the discussion are the words "earthquake" and "hurricane" – at least not in this part of the country.

But there is a huge layer of additional safety and security when it comes to being in an environment that is prepared to look out for the health and well-being of its residents, regardless of what Mother Nature throws its way.

"A continuing care community by nature has security measures in place," said George Clemes, administrator of business and fund development at Augsburg Lutheran Home and Village. "If you are by yourself in a house and can get to a phone in an emergency, that's great. But if you can't reach the phone, there can be serious consequences."

Clemes noted that at Augsburg, annual, as well as monthly, emergency drills are routine.

"We have fire drills on every shift once a month," he said. "And everyone routinely re-evaluates his role in the event of an emergency."

He added that at Augsburg, every room has a pull cord, which alerts staff that a resident needs to be checked on immediately.

"We had warning of Hurricane Irene, but the earthquake really caught us by surprise," he said. "We immediately went out and checked on every one of our almost 400 residents to make sure they were all right."

While there was no warning for the earthquake, everyone had a few days notice that Irene was coming.

“We reviewed everything for a couple of days and went over the safety procedures with our managers, who in turn went over everything with their staff,” said Phil Golden, director of Mount Washington’s Springwell Senior Living. “We made sure our generators were working properly in the event that we lost power.”

Golden added that Springwell also stocked up on additional food, flashlights and three- to five-days of bottled water. In spite of the community’s preparations there was an unexpected problem.

“We did lose phone service because the transformers were knocked out by lightning, which was unnerving,” Golden said. “We had to set up an emergency phone line and used our cells to reach our residents’ families.

“We told them, ‘The phones are out, but your family member is fine.’ ”

For Augsburg resident Marie Garske, Irene was pretty painless. She noted that those in independent living were without power for a number of hours – much of the time when the residents were sleeping. However those living in the area around Augsburg were without power for several days.

“We had no problem with food: Dinner was served in the dining room and was delivered to residents who were not able to get there on their own,” Garske said. “Plus a number of staff who were not typically scheduled to work did come in to help out.”

In preparation for Irene, Augsburg called in additional staff to stay on-site in the event that extra hands were needed, and who were also available to keep an eye on the winds and whether or not there was flooding in the vicinity. Springwell also called in additional staff.

“We had extra people who could help with delivering food to the resident’s apartments and to calm people down if that was necessary,” Golden said.

Both Clemes and Golden reported that their residents pretty much took the hurricane and earthquake in stride. At Springwell, the earthquake was more or less limited to knocking a few pictures off residents’ walls.

“Our residents very much appreciate how we take care of them and that we make certain to know if they need anything that we can help them with,” Clemes said.