



INNOVATIONS IN PALTC

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Serving Selflessly Gives Residents' Lives Meaning

Are we seeing the disability or the potential? Residents with challenges such as Alzheimer's disease, stroke, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, or vision impairment prepare meals and feed the homeless throughout California.

Having been a nursing home administrator for almost 20 years, I have seen firsthand the depression and apathy so prevalent in our communities. We have all been struggling to find the "magic pill" that will solve these problems. The truth is, there is no one magic pill. But I believe there are some holes we have yet to find and fill. One of them is the transformative power of selfless service.

We have made tremendous strides in our abilities as caregivers and the level of care we provide. Resident-centered care and dramatic advances in our environments have made traditional nursing homes almost unrecognizable.

However, in the end, even if we have the world's best caregivers and provide unlimited choices and state-of-the-art or homelike accommodations, is it still possible people could feel *useless* for the rest of their lives? If you receive the best of the best that long-term care has to offer but no one needs you anymore, might you still feel like a burden? Although superior care, choices, and environment are the foundation of what we do, is that enough? Being a grateful "care receiver" does not necessarily give people meaning and purpose in their life — it does not provide a reason to get out of bed.

Life is more than receiving. Life is more than choice and entertainment. Life is being needed — having purpose, having responsibility, being able to give, and being able to serve. And residents *can* give in a productive, meaningful way if given the opportunity. This belief

led to the inception of the A Heart to Serve program at Rockport Healthcare Services in California. Currently over 70 of Rockport's communities are engaged in this great experiment, feeding thousands in need every month.

At the foundation of this program is the belief that anyone with "a heart to serve" can serve. Residents with Alzheimer's disease in long-term care have been helping with simple tasks for years. They fold napkins and towels, clean up after meals, and always seem ready to lend a hand. If they can perform these tasks and have this innate desire to help, they can serve people in need in their community.

Rockport Healthcare Services has developed another program that allows hundreds of people with Alzheimer's to use plastic chef knives and other tools to safely prepare food. They chop vegetables and meat to make salads, slice fruit, and make delicious deserts to feed the men, women, and children at local homeless shelters and soup kitchens. And then these same residents go out to the shelters and scoop the food onto the plates of grateful members of the community.

Dozens of people with left-sided neglect syndrome after stroke are using their right arm to turn the handle of the cheese grater while another resident with right-sided neglect feeds the cheese in and presses down, teaming up to help their community. Residents with Parkinson's disease are chopping chicken and turkey for chef salads with safety knives. People who experience tremors are still capable of serving others. With adaptive equipment that supports their desire to do useful work, it is amazing to see what people *can* do.

Thinking differently about the value each person brings to our community often requires some shifts in our own habits. As caregivers, sometimes our desire to help is so strong that we don't see the harm helping can do. I watched one of our residents with a history of stroke work for five minutes to cut a slice of cantaloupe. It came out looking more like the state of Texas than a traditional slice — but doubtless was just as delicious! Watching her determination filled me with pride. She was focused and ready to start working on the next slice, and a smile was dawning on her face. But then a well-meaning activity aide came over to her, said, "Oh, look at that — let me help," and quickly sliced off the rough edges. I could see the life drain right out of her. She immediately started backing away from the table and struggled to roll her wheelchair out of

the dining room with an expression of defeat and embarrassment. She had gone from joy back to depression in a flash.

Residents are the stars of A Heart to Serve. Caregivers are the stagehands. The power behind the desire to help others should never be underestimated. Miraculous things happen while the residents are in charge and we are their assistants. We can do our part by repositioning a pan, finding a better scoop, or adjusting the height of the table — and then we can step back into the shadows and watch what we didn't think was possible. This isn't about us. It's about people finding their way back to a valuable place in our society, back to being needed, back to having self-worth ... to finding a reason to get out of bed. We are just beginning to understand the possibilities and the role of selfless service in the lives of people in long-term care and to see the potential in each of them to contribute to our world in a meaningful way. 

Mr. Lysobey has worked in the nursing home profession for over 20 years. He currently works for Rockport Healthcare Services as president of the Redwood Region and oversees recreation services and workforce development. He believes that selfless service is key to addressing the rampant apathy and depression we find in long-term care.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Whenever we hear the word *innovation*, mostly what comes to mind is something like an iPhone or a fancy wearable gadget. But the truth is that we can create much needed efficiencies for our communities and our patients by thinking outside the box for simple, day-to-day routines. In one of our previous "Innovations in PALTC" columns we shared the exciting work being led by TimeSlips (timeslips.org), where creativity is helping bring a sense of worth to nursing home residents. In this article, the author has shared a simple yet innovative approach for bringing a sense of purpose to frail nursing home residents. This example inspires us to not settle for the status quo and continue to brainstorm ideas to engage our residents in innovative initiatives.

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in PALTC" column

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