PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

By Joan Devine, RN, BSN, LNHA

Three Little Pigs: COVID-19, Nursing Homes, and Person-Directed Culture — What’s the Connection?

We all know the story of the three little pigs and the big bad wolf. Each of the pigs built a home with the same goal: keeping all who lived within safe from the big bad wolf. One home was made of straw, one of wood, and one of brick. We also know which of these homes fared best when faced with the huffing and puffing of the big bad wolf: the house of brick. The first two little pigs picked cheaper materials to offer shelter, but the third pig planned well and was more resourceful: he learned from what the others had done, made a deliberate decision to use the best material possible, and likely even consulted with experts in the design.

The third pig was willing to invest the time required to ensure quality and sustainability. In some versions of the story, he even housed the other pigs after the wolf had destroyed their homes. Because the third little pig built his home on a solid foundation of both people and materials, the havoc wreaked by the wolf did not result in devasting harm.

What does this have to do with nursing homes, person-directed culture, and COVID-19? For nursing homes, the big bad wolf came in the form of COVID-19 over the past two years. Like the three little pigs, none of us were untouched by the wolf’s devastation. What helped some nursing homes manage the challenges of COVID-19 isolation and visiting restrictions better than others?

That’s where I propose person-directed culture fits in this story. A person-directed culture is more than just incorporating some person-directed practices into your routines. A culture that is person-directed is about more than what you do, or your individual practices; it’s about understanding why and taking a deliberate approach to how those practices are woven into daily routines and relationships.

The foundational practices that are part of a person-directed culture are supported by the Pioneer Network Values and Principles (https://www.pioneernetwork.net/about-us/mission-vision-values/). These values, when woven into the culture, helped (and continue to help) organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic to support residents as they were isolated, with their daily routines and relationships disrupted. Knowing the residents and having processes and systems to respect their individuality helped to create new ways to find meaning in these trying times and alleviated some of the loneliness, helplessness, grief, fear, and boredom they experienced.

Whether you are part of a community whose person-directed culture is firmly embedded or one whose foundation is not solidly built, now is the time for re-envisioning — especially if your community’s person-directed practices got lost in the day-to-day chaos wreaked by COVID-19. Now is the opportunity to re-evaluate and inspect, to see where the foundation has been cracked by the huffing and puffing of COVID-19, and then make a commitment to rebuild it right.

It won’t be easy — building a strong foundation never is — but there is much at stake as we rebuild after COVID-19. And you’re not in this alone. As you evaluate and plan for how to grow a person-directed culture, tools and resources are available from many sources, including the following from the Pioneer Network:

- Pioneer Network Resource Library (https://www.pioneer network.net/resource/)
- “Continuous of Person-Directed Culture” (https://bit.ly/3iHcw)
- “A Free Starter Kit for Engaging Staff in Individualizing Care” (https://bit.ly/3IawuAF)

These will help you and your team reimagine how to create the processes to support person-directed care in today’s very challenging environment.

In growing or revitalizing a person-directed culture, Pioneer Network’s values remind us that risk-taking is a normal part of life. We have to be prepared to feel a little uncomfortable as we shore up or rebuild the foundations of our communities in order to move forward and reimagine the future. We have to recognize that some of the old ways just won’t work; so as we look to the foundational practices as a place to start, the processes we put in place may look very different.

Culture change and transformation, as we are reminded, are not destinations, but a journey, always a work in progress. Even the third little pig in his comfortable house of brick, who may have come through the huffing and puffing better than most, did not dare to sit back and rest on his laurels. Together, let’s learn a lesson from the three little pigs. Build well on a firm foundation — one that supports a person-directed culture — so that we’ll be ready when the next wolf comes our way.

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