



Creating a Great Place to Eat

Here are three innovations that are changing the way we think about senior dining programs. **BY RICHARD SCHENKEL**

Innovation in dining programs is at the heart of strategies that improve care, enhance resident dignity and position facilities to compete in a challenging economy. Some innovations are simple, requiring a little creativity and a small investment to implement, while others are unlikely

to succeed without a more substantial commitment. Here are three innovations that are changing the way we think about senior dining programs.

REFRESH THE HYDRATION STATION

Americans are realizing that sugary sodas and juices are contributing to an epidemic of obesity and diabetes. In addition, residents of senior communities are at heightened risk for dehydration. This may be the result of medication and physical limitations that make it difficult to access drinks, or decreased mental acuity that causes residents to forget to hydrate if not reminded frequently.

Hydration stations are a great solution to these challenges. Some facilities place camping-style coolers in public areas, but this doesn't help residents with motor skill limitations, nor does it communicate anything about what is in the cooler or remind them why it is important to stay hydrated.

Innovative hydration programs combine flavor, visual cues and information. For example, The Cedars, an assisted living community in Dartmouth, Mass., uses clear, easy-to-use dispensers at stations that include signage explaining the benefits of hydration to the residents. The water is infused with fresh fruit, vegetables or herbs and the flavors change daily. Through the containers, the residents can actually see the fresh water and fruit, a visual cue to hydrate more often.

DECENTRALIZED DINING PROGRAMS

Decentralized dining programs increase the choices available to residents while accommodating the flexible schedules of seniors with more active lifestyles. There are several options used to implement a decentralized program.

For residents who wish or need to eat in their rooms, food may be prepared in the kitchen and then loaded onto steam carts that enable the dining staff to finish and plate the meal bedside. Residents are offered greater choice and the sights and aromas of a more fulfilling dining experience. Facilities with multiple dining areas



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may offer spaces with more or less formal levels of service. Food may be prepared in the kitchen and be transported to satellite stations where residents make selections and watch as their meal is finished, plated and served at their table.

Decentralized dining may necessitate investment in infrastructure, equipment and personnel. Menus with more choices call for sophisticated planning, procurement and food preparation to avoid waste and keep expenses under control. Mobile steam carts and satellite serving stations with integrated induction cooking are effective and resident-safe options for tableside finishing.

Of course, staff must deliver a higher level of hospitality and service. However, the benefits of the program include higher resident satisfaction, healthier residents who eat more of what they order, and a dining program that is marketable to prospective residents that tour a facility and stay to sample the dining program.

ENHANCED PUREE PROGRAM

Facilities have access to a wider variety of pureed items through food distributors than ever before, but frozen, processed discs of puree are not the type of culinary and dietary innovation most residents and caregivers find desirable. However, there are some innovative programs that are taking purees to a new level, enhancing nutrition, resident dignity and flavor while providing a true differentiator to the facility. Wauconda HealthCare and Rehabilitation Centre, north of Chicago, incorporates the same fresh food approach and flavor profiles as the menu offered to all residents.

Their puree program uses only fresh ingredients and employs preparation techniques that preserve the nutrients and colors of the food, incorporate fresh seasonings, use natural thickening agents like gelatins rather than commercial thickeners, and create appealing presentations. Piping and molding has been supplemented with

sophisticated layering techniques that can create a sandwich or even a puree pizza that looks as delicious as a deep dish pizza fresh from the oven.

INNOVATE TO SUCCEED

Dining programs have the potential to exist at the crossroads of health and wellness, human interaction and social responsibil-

ity, and innovations like these can elevate a dining program to operate at that level. Residents and their families understand the difference and will reward the facilities that embrace innovation. ■

Richard Schenkel is president and CEO, Unidine Corp. DISCLOSURE: Unidine is a dining management company.

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