

Senior living communities prioritize mental health resources to support resident well-being

By **ANDREA DECKERT**

Entering a senior living community or nursing home can be a major life adjustment, said Chantel Foster, social work manager at Friendly Senior Living.



Chantel Foster

“You don’t hear people say, ‘I want to move into a nursing home,’” Foster noted, adding that while some people adapt well, others face challenges — and that can significantly affect their emotional well-being.

Across the region, senior communities are expanding access to emotional wellness resources to meet the growing demand.

Foster said the need for mental health support is increasing across age groups, particularly among seniors coping with loss or new health diagnoses.

Friendly Senior Living partners with medical professionals — including a consulting psychiatrist and a psychiatric nurse practitioner — to support residents through both in-person and telemedicine services.

The organization also emphasizes purposeful engagement through programs, activities and volunteer opportunities designed to foster connection and a sense of belonging.

From the outset, Foster and her team meet with new residents to gather detailed social histories, identify potential concerns and develop individualized action plans to help ease the transition.

Loneliness and boredom are common

challenges, she said, but understanding and incorporating elements of a person’s daily routine can make a meaningful difference.

Foster shared a personal example: when her grandfather entered a nursing home, staff made sure to serve him a glass of beer with dinner — something that had been part of his everyday life.

“It’s the simple things that can really matter,” Foster said.

Megan Brown, elder advocate at St. John’s, agreed that small changes can make a big difference, especially when it comes to helping older adults adjust to major life transitions.

“When we notice something is a little off with a resident, we address it,” Brown said.

St. John’s offers a variety of options aimed at improving residents’ overall well-being, from social activities and grief support groups to wellness classes. Programs include meditation, arts and crafts, community speakers and spiritual care opportunities.

To promote physical and mental health, St. John’s also recently created a trails map highlighting the walking paths on its property, encouraging residents to spend more time outdoors.

The organization collaborates with outside partners as well, including the University of Rochester, which provides mental health services tailored to older adults.

Residents play an active role in supporting one another. Brown noted that a group recently launched its own low-vision support group after recognizing a shared need.

Volunteerism is another key part of life at St. John’s — about 25 percent of residents take part in volunteer activities, which

Brown said often have a positive impact on their own mood and outlook.



Tony Zaccaglino

Tony Zaccaglino, vice president of senior housing at St. John’s, said the organization enhanced its emotional wellness programs in response to challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened loneliness and

isolation among older adults nationwide.

In response, St. John’s expanded its team of elder care advocates and added its own wellness specialist — steps that Zaccaglino said have produced clear benefits.

“There really was a need for these services, especially due to COVID-19, and we addressed it,” he said.



Jeff Sweeney

Jeff Sweeney, vice president of Community Services at Episcopal SeniorLife Communities, said many older adults are at risk of social isolation, and the organization takes deliberate steps to ensure that doesn’t happen.

That includes neighborhood programs offered across all Episcopal SeniorLife campuses, which integrate health and wellness activities designed to foster connection.

“Such interactions provide a sense of belonging and a chance to make new friends — something that doesn’t always come eas-

ily for older adults,” Sweeney said. “It also helps with self-esteem, which has a positive impact on mental health.”



Teresa Galbier

Teresa Galbier, vice president of Dementia Program Development at Episcopal SeniorLife, said there is a growing need for mental health supports for those impacted with dementia.

Studies show many people with dementia

also experience other mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, she noted, adding that the organization provides support for them in several ways.

Because staff receive specialized training, they can quickly recognize red flags and respond appropriately. Solutions range from simple environmental adjustments, such as improving lighting, to coordinating care with clinicians, she said.

Episcopal SeniorLife also offers dementia-friendly activities — from cornhole and chair yoga to brain health programs — all aimed at promoting socialization, health and overall well-being.

This year, the organization will host a Blue Christmas service, providing a supportive space for individuals to acknowledge grief, loss and other difficult emotions during the holiday season.

“It’s about meeting people where they are and making sure they feel supported,” Galbier said.

adeckert@bridgetowermedia.com / (585) 653-4021