

Senior living options for people living with dementia have changed dramatically over the years. From the early 1900s to late 1950s, people with Alzheimers disease were typically admitted to institutional mental hospitals. As it became clear this was not the appropriate environment in the 1960s, there was a shift from mental hospitals to skilled nursing facilities. In the 1970s, facilities began to introduce active therapies to focus on helping people maximize remaining abilities. In 1981, Dr. Brown Wilson introduced the assisted living model – broadening the focus to health, housing, and hospitality. Today we find community living designs creating supportive environments for person-centered care. Senior living spaces are configured based on individualized care needs of people living independently, with assistance, in specialized memory care units, or skilled nursing homes.

When it comes to the physical and communication needs of changing abilities for people living with dementia, ENVIRONMENT MATTERS. A Positive Approach[™] to care philosophy would encourage these best practices when it comes to considering the most supportive environment at any given stage during the progression of dementia.

The Four Fs: What features of an environment will provide someone a sense of:

- Friendliness – I am liked here, I am wanted here
- Familiarity – I am comfortable and at ease in this place
- Functionality – I know what I am to do here
- Forgiveness - I can make mistakes and errors and it will be OK

The Four Ss: What special features of a space will make a difference? What personal preferences (likes and dislikes) need to be considered?

- Spaces (intimate, personal, public)
- Sensations (sights, sounds, feels, smells, tastes)
- Surfaces (sit, stand, work on, rest on, walk on)
- Social (groups, activities, roles, expectations)

In Europe, over the last 5 years, the interest in supportive living environments has expanded into the initiative of creating dementia-friendly communities at large. One of the foundational beliefs is to create a culture of inclusion.

“A flourishing community seeks to honor, value and include all of its members in a common life. It actively seeks creative improvements in a shared life because it understands that meeting the needs of the most vulnerable and dependent members cannot be separated from its own.”

- Reverend John McFadden, Fox Valley Memory Project

A first step in creating a culture of inclusion is to begin by opening the doors that

separate the various levels of care within senior living communities. The Greenhouse Project is an example of the trend toward person centered culture change and how redesigning supportive living environments can provide options and alternatives to traditional Assisted Living and Memory Care facilities.

As society continues to evolve in its understanding and perception of dementia, you can be sure so will the concepts and designs of supportive living environments that help individuals and families to live more fully with dementia.

References:

1. Excellence in Design: Optimal Living Space for People with Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias. Chmielewski, EDAC, Perkins Eastman
2. Article by Andy Dworkin, The Oregonian on January 05, 2010