

**Low Cost Practical Strategies to Transform Nursing Home Environments:  
Towards Better Quality of Life**

**Prepared for Quality Partners Nursing Home QIO Support Center**

by

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**Low Cost Practical Strategies to Transform Nursing Home Environments: Towards Better Quality of Life**  
**Material adapted from Practical Strategies Workbook and Manual by Lois J. Cutler & Rosalie A. Kane**  
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Changing the existing physical environment of nursing homes in ways that improve residents' quality of life (QOL) and *without major expenditures can happen*. It simply requires a commitment to improve the living environments for all residents – not to simply become homelike but to become an actual home for the residents within the larger community of the overall facility. The four common themes that run throughout this material include:

- **Network with the larger community to bring in talent and resources that the facility cannot provide.** Recruit local organizations, churches, local schools, vocational techs, and college students to assist with projects. Seek press coverage. Notify the local newspaper about projects and the organizations and people who have assisted with those projects. Don't operate in isolation in your community.
- **An overall cleaning of the facility and the addition of color to walls and furnishings** can vastly improve the aesthetics of many older nursing homes. Let there be light! Open drapes and blinds and increase light bulb wattage. Have a garage sale for unused items.
- **Equipment, supplies and furnishings are more expensive when they are purchased from a hospital supply company.** Home improvement stores and discount stores offer an incredible variety of materials that satisfy the life safety requirements, are less expensive and are available off the Internet.
- **Move beyond looking at the overall environment of a space, instead concentrate on the individual components that comprise this larger environment** including noise levels, distance from amenities, odors (both pleasant and not so pleasant), and the functionality of furnishings. Because we become accustomed to our surroundings and often don't see the clutter, closed blinds, shabby shower curtains, drab paint and years of dirt buildup, enlist another set of eyes to assess the environment and give recommendations for improvements.

## Five Tasks for Transforming Nursing Home Environments Towards Better Quality of Life

<p><b>Task 1</b> <b>Create environmental task force</b></p>	<p>Assemble committee of stakeholders (8 to 12 members) who are directly involved with built environment including staff, management, and board members. Invite outside professionals to participate on intermittent basis. Request departments to send representative rather than management appointing committee</p>
<p><b>Task 2</b> <b>Begin the discussion</b></p>	<p>Complete 4 step SWOT tool to analyze strengths and weaknesses of current environment</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify greatest <b>strengths</b> of physical environment</li> <li>2. Identify greatest <b>weaknesses</b> of physical environment</li> <li>3. Identify greatest <b>external opportunities</b> available to facility</li> <li>4. Identify greatest <b>external threats</b> to facility</li> </ol>
<p><b>Task 3</b> <b>Floor Plan Analysis</b></p>	<p>Purpose is to visually understand different spaces in facility, location and how used Obtain floor plan for facility Color different spaces to differentiate between shared and private spaces Assess if shared spaces are evenly distributed throughout facility</p>
<p><b>Task 4</b> <b>Self assessment of features in environment including photographs</b></p>	<p>Identify space (entrance &amp; reception room, gathering spaces, learning and meditation spaces, corridors, dining areas, staff amenities, resident rooms &amp; bathrooms, rehab/short stay rooms, shower/tub rooms, outdoor amenities, lounge space) and determine if furnishings, equipment and décor of room is: 1) unacceptable – needs immediate attention; 2) OK – needs some work; or 3) Acceptable – needs no improvement. Detailed assessment tools for each space are available from authors. Take photographs to point out areas needing improvement and areas that work well. (Photographs help facilitate committee discussion)</p>
<p><b>Task 5</b> <b>Staff, resident, family and volunteer focus groups; Identify and Prioritize</b></p>	<p>Either through focus groups or questionnaires, solicit information from users of environment. Resident and family councils are good sources of information. List all potential improvements and then prioritize them remembering that sometimes a small improvement generates enthusiasm to complete the larger projects.</p>

## Facility Entrance and Reception Area

### Overall Goal:

Create welcoming entrance that is accessible, attractive, non-institutional, well lighted, secure, and provides seating options. Encourage residents to use the area and to welcome visitors as they arrive.

### Examples of Improvement Strategies:

- Create outdoor entrance sign by enlisting art students to submit designs, residents vote on choice
- Light sign with solar powered lights
- Decorate tree(s) at entrance with lights for holiday
- Landscape with flowers using local school colors and school volunteers
- Repaint curb cut-out
- Invite neighborhood children to trick & treat at Halloween & hunt Easter eggs
- In reception area concentrate on good smells, pleasant sounds and attractive view
- Create coffee counter that includes bread from bread making machine, jam, cookies, beverages
- Instead of a counter use a concierge desk
- On desk place bouquet of flowers picked from garden outside or divide funeral flower sprays into smaller arrangements. Organize resident “flower committee”
- Provide music appropriate to the season
- Provide ample and moveable seating for residents and visitors

## Gathering Space

### **Overall Goal:**

Create facility-wide social space that function as the neighborhood coffee shop – a place that is down the corridor from your home, which you travel to for the purpose of enjoying a treat, the company of others or just for a change of scenery.

This can be as simple as a counter to dispense ice cream or a coffee shop with tables and chairs. Create spaces that serve a purpose such as a post office area, bank, or vending area with tables & chairs

### **Examples of Improvement Strategies:**

- Create the ambience of a coffee shop or ice cream parlor with bistro type furniture and tables with brightly colored umbrellas
- Create decorative signage identifying space using large wood letters painted in bright colors
- Make use of kiosks that offer a variety of merchandise, can travel to nursing units and can easily be stored when not in use
- Create “lunch counter” utilizing crock-pots, microwaves, toaster ovens, toasters, and disposable dishes to serve a daily menu of soup and sandwiches.
- Lunch counter menu of soup and sandwiches can easily be interchanged with pie and ice cream for afternoon breaks
- Provide moveable seating
- If using traveling ice cream carts, designate space on unit for gathering place rather than simply delivering treats to resident rooms

## Learning Centers

### Overall Goal:

Don't rely on donated encyclopedias and National Geographic to create a life long learning experience. Create a Learning Center for residents, family, and staff. Make available brochures from organizations such as the Alzheimer's or Diabetes foundations. Promote exercise and weight control. Consider designating space to create centers for crafts such as pottery, jewelry making, art classes, cooking classes, piano lessons, hand bell choirs, pet care, computer classes, concerts, lectures, and other opportunities that encourage residents to create and be creative. Create a library and invite the local Bookmobile to visit on a regular basis. Invite authors to read their work, musicians to play their music and artists to demonstrate their work on a regular basis.

### Examples of Improvement Strategies:

- Create Learning Center for residents, family members and staff that provides educational materials and wellness incentives
- In large space, create several areas that are readily identified as serving a purpose such as a computer center, craft center, movie area, coffee/snack bar, and conversation area
- Create small meditation area in corner of large room
- Use window covering panels that resemble stained glass to set tone of meditation space
- In large spaces, decorate with large plants to increase privacy
- Provide several comfortable chairs each with an adjacent table and lamp
- Create library or reading center with tables, shelves, adjustable lighting, reading aids, large prints books, diaries for personal writings, and space for members of a book club to come together
- Provide computers at individual stations and schedule high school volunteers to assist
- Designate a desk as the "newsroom" where a facility newspaper can be developed with volunteer help from local journalism students. Enlist residents to be reporters
- Designate a corner for a "Movie Theater" with large screen television, comfortable chairs, room darkening shades and a popcorn machine
- Consider installing an "invisible fence" for pet control inside facility rather than relying on wander guard or gates
- Use large brightly colored fish in an aquarium to enhance enjoyment and relaxation

## Staff Amenities

### **Overall Goal:**

Routinely staff members have been assigned break room space in the basement of a facility that is furnished with cast offs, has equipment and appliances that often malfunction, and space that is expected to serve the dual purpose for staff who want to socialize as well as those who want a quiet time. Reverse this trend and provide staff with an abundance of spaces including tables in main dining room, a computer station and quiet space for reading or meditation.

### **Examples of Improvement Strategies:**

- Enhance the staff break room. It should have good lighting, comfortable chairs, conversation arrangements, appliances that work, flat surfaces for both eating and writing and a quiet corner
- Provide computer area or computer station for private staff use
- Designate a table and regular day as “give-away or exchange” where children’s clothes, extra produce from gardens, reading material, videos, and other items can be exchanged or given away
- Provide prayer corner or small meditation room designated for staff
- Encourage staff to use lounge or dining spaces to hold baby or wedding showers or other celebratory events. Invite residents to participate along with members of the community

## Corridors

### Overall Goal:

Corridors serve multiple purposes. Their main purpose is serving as a passageway for traveling from one place to another. Distance and functionality are considerations as well as signage that direct visitors to their destination. Corridors serve a cueing purpose by assisting the residents in way finding so it is helpful to distinguish one corridor from another through use of decorations and color. Be aware that the signage may be worded in a way that gives unintended or degrading messages.

### Examples of Improvement Strategies:

- At the entrance, replace the resident and staff directory on the wall with staff, volunteer or residents who sit at a concierge desk and give directions
- Take inventory of current pictures on corridor walls and how long they have been there, replacing them often
- Create a theme for the overall facility and decorate each corridor in accordance with theme
- Replace institutional looking light fixtures with residential type fixtures
- Create a gallery along corridor wall with resident, community citizen or student artwork. Invite participants to opening night reception
- Install inexpensive track lighting above display
- Create “wall of honor” with framed individual photographs of all residents 100 years old
- Assist residents in creating a quilt specific to their household or unit that can be hung in corridor
- Grab bars along corridor walls are essential but also require maintenance. Place wallpaper border behind handrails for a dramatic effect
- Create welcoming individualized entrance to resident room including large print name plate, mail box, and decorations that change with the season



## Dining Area

### **Overall Goal:**

Create pleasant and varied dining experience by careful attention to ambience; noise level; attractive, colorful & changing table settings, varied table sizes, different dining partners, multiple dining locations, changing service patterns and food choices.

### **Examples of Improvement Strategies:**

- Provide battery powered decorative lights on table for special evening meal
- Devote space for parlor seating arrangement in dining room for residents to gather prior to meal
- In large room, alternate colors of table coverings between groupings of tables
- Separate large spaces with lattice screens that have plastic ivy interwoven in slats
- Uses dishes that are multi-colored and/or patterned being aware of contrast between food item and dish (no coffee in brown cup or milk in white glass)

## Rehab/Short Stay Resident Room

### Overall Goal:

Think of a motel room and the amenities that are offered to the “guests”. Create an experience where the residents continue their normal routines and control over their life to the best of their ability.

### Examples of Improvement Strategies:

- In shared rooms, clearly delineate the 2 living spaces, and ensure that each has its own duplicate amenities
- Develop information book that describes facility schedules, activities, amenities and locations, nearby hotels, telephone numbers – information that is typically found in a hotel book
- Provide each new resident a small calendar on which they can write appointments
- Clocks are important. Include radio/alarm clock and wall clock with large color contrasting numbers
- Provide writing desk or flat surface with stationary and availability of stamps
- Provide post cards featuring facility images
- Create a nourishment center in a lockable cabinet in room. Include coffee maker with coffee packets & tea bags, a toaster, and a dorm type refrigerator for beverages and fruit. (Cabinet could be locked when not conducive to resident use.)
- Make available small erasable board for resident to post personal telephone numbers
- Purchase attractive clothes hangers (not the metal type returned with dry cleaning)
- Provide terry cloth bathrobe with facility logo
- Provide television and telephone
- Provide ample moveable chairs for visiting

## Shared Shower/Tub Room

### **Overall Goal:**

Think spa! Bathing or showering in a nursing home is a mandatory task that seldom provides enjoyment for either staff or resident. Enhance the experience by creating a pleasant environment complete with a vanity where residents can have their hair styled, be given a manicure or other spa treatment. A complete “makeover” of room can be accomplished with \$1500 or started with \$25 for a new shower curtain.

### **Examples of Improvement Strategies:**

- Change signage at entrance to read “Spa Room”
- Remove any items stored in room that do not enhance bathing experience
- Remove all visible signage that is instructional such as “clean tub after every use” and re-locate to inside of cabinet door
- Clean and repaint room
- Re-grout and shine tile surfaces
- Replace sink faucets with single lever handles
- Replace lights over or at sides of sink with decorative residential style light fixtures
- Replace shower curtains with brightly colored ones that accent the tile for under \$25
- Install vanity with mirror, lights and comfortable chair
- Purchase inexpensive storage units in a variety of styles such as a wall shelf, glass double door cabinet, tower shelving unit that fits in a narrow space for towel storage or a rolling cart that can be stored under vanity
- Provide brightly covered hooks and shelf for resident’s belongings
- Provide terry cloth bathrobes for all residents
- Provide freestanding or mounted heated towel holder
- Coordinate towel color with tile and decorations
- Add stencils and other decorations to enhance the ambience of the room

## Resident Room

### **Overall Goal:**

Stepping over the threshold into a resident's room is similar to entering the front door to her/his home. Create an entrance that is reminiscent of the house down the block that you have always wanted to be invited into. Consider painting each door frame a different color to increase cueing and way finding. Solicit correspondence from community to residents and develop facility-wide newsletter. Install mailbox at each resident entrance to receive correspondence. If room is shared, designate equal space for each resident. Use color to differentiate the spaces. Encourage each resident and family to decorate their portion of the room to their own tastes, even if that results in two separate motifs. Identify and furnish the space as a "living" space not just a "sleeping" space. Let there be light. Pay close attention to providing adequate illumination levels from task and fixed light fixtures as well as natural light from windows.

### **Examples of Improvement Strategies:**

- Create attractive name plates with large lettering on a contrasting color background
- Install a mailbox adjacent to the door of each resident (or directly inside door) to accommodate a newsletter and other communications including invitations to facility events (such as social hour, or the opening night reception for the gallery)
- In shared room, differentiate the two equal spaces as "belonging" to each resident
- Paint each side of room a contrasting color or use armoires, wardrobes, or shelving units as room dividers to identify separate space
- Create attractive privacy curtains by purchasing fire rated fabric or curtains and attaching them with shower or drapery rings. Velcro straps can create an attractive tie-back effect
- Consider half-window café style curtains as an attractive addition to blinds
- Add wall paper borders and/or shelving to the upper 1/3 of wall for display space which is especially appropriate for dementia unit
- Flexibility of space can be achieved with wall mounted drop-leaf shelve/table that provides flat surface for resident to work on hobbies, place a book or eat a meal
- Roll & Go Puzzle carriers store partially completed puzzle for later use (\$15)
- When not in use, wheelchairs in room can create an obstacle. In close proximity to bed, build "wheelchair bin" with flat surface for display or workspace
- Install "cane hooks" for cane storage near bed and chair
- Remove built in standardized storage cabinets and replace with flexible storage units that are tailored to resident storage needs and interests or hobbies
- Renovate built in storage with new handles, drawer pulls and paint
- Inexpensive remote control products provide simple touch control for turning on and adjusting light levels providing task lighting during the day and a night light at night
- Table top lamp can be converted into a night-light with a simple to use product
- Rheostats for overhead lights are inexpensive, easy to install, can serve as a night light and provide flexibility in light levels

## **Resident Bathroom**

### **Overall Goal:**

Often residents share a bathroom so the challenge becomes how to personalize the bathroom to the specific needs of each resident while creating an attractive and functional bathroom that provides adequate storage space.

### **Examples of Improvement Strategies:**

- Consider storage needs for each resident and provide storage units specific to those needs and differentiate colors of units between residents
- Consider methods to increase counter space around sink
- Clean and re-grout tile
- Paint room or simply paint door molding a contrasting color from wall
- Replace sink faucet hardware with single lever
- Install illuminated light switches or better yet, install motion sensor light switches
- Replace light fixtures with decorative residential type
- If mirror is without a border, purchase decorative wood moldings and attach around mirror
- A variety of storage units are available from home improvement stores at reasonable costs
- Install a separate colored storage unit for each resident (size & style depending on allowable space)
- Add residential type amenities such as Kleenex box covers that differ between bathrooms
- Consider replacing towel bars with colorful plastic ones or at the least, hang bright colored hooks on the wall
- Provide towels in colors other than white and beige

## Outdoor Amenities

### **Overall Goal:**

Outdoor space functions as an additional lounge and every effort should be made to facilitate residents' independent use of the space. The most popular outdoor space is just outside the main entrance where real life activities take place. Create a "welcoming" patio at the front entrance. Accommodate and encourage use of all outdoor space by providing adequate seating protected from the sun.

### **Examples of Improvement Strategies:**

- Create a front porch area reminiscent of porches from the past
- Enhance area directly outside front entrance to create functional and inviting patio space for residents to sit, watch and socialize
- Enlist students or scouts to plant flower garden
- Provide overhead covering for all seating
- To provide shade, awnings are available that attach directly to a building and roll up when not in use
- Umbrellas are available that attach directly to a wheel chair or patio chair
- If automatic door is not available for residents to use outdoor space independently, portable doorbells are available for the resident to signal for assistance
- Plant vegetable garden and use, donate, or sell the produce as a fund raising function
- Provide bird feeders, push lawn mowers, and raised garden areas for resident involvement
- Vegetation and flower planters should be at wheelchair height rather than ground level so they can be viewed from a sitting position

## Lounge Space

### Overall Goal:

Often by necessity, lounges support both formal and informal activities. The location of the lounge in relation to the nursing station will determine how the lounge is used and how often it is used. A secluded lounge at the end of a corridor will be underused no matter how elaborate the furnishings & equipment is. Accommodate both passive and active functions in a lounge by providing varied seating arrangements throughout the room making sure to accommodate the resident who simply wants to sit in a quiet area and watch the activity.

### Examples of Improvement Strategies:

- Provide adequate lighting, both overhead and task lighting
- Provide a daily newspaper and a table or horizontal surface to lay the newspaper flat while reading. Provide adequate task lighting
- Add a non-heat producing fireplace for ambience
- Create a sitting area around the fireplace hearth area
- In facilities with an abundance of shared rooms, there is a constant need for small private spaces so resident can be alone with visitors. Create small conversation areas in larger rooms such as in a corner of the dining room, the reception area or create several seating areas in the central lounge but separate them with shelving units or large plants or place the furniture back to back
- In facilities with a majority of private rooms, furnish lounge space so it can be used for specific purposes such as a room devoted to crafts or cards or a room furnished with elegant dining table and chairs which can be used for formal resident dining or family meals
- Provide enough storage space that equipment is not in view when not in use
- If there is a television in the space, do not let it dominate the room. Place it in a designated section with seating and ability to control light levels

**GOOD QUALITY OF CARE AT CHILDBIRTH:** This produces a triple return on investment, saving mothers and newborns and preventing stillbirths. The provision of effective care for all women and babies at the time of birth in facilities could prevent an estimated 113,000 maternal deaths, 531,000 stillbirths and 1.3 million neonatal deaths annually by 2020 at an estimated running cost of US\$4.5 billion per year (US\$0.9 per person).<sup>19,20</sup> **IMMUNIZATION:** This is among the most cost-effective of health interventions.Â The Human Rights Council has also issued practical technical guidance to help countries apply human rights standards and principles in health programmes for women, children and adolescents.