

Regulation

What You Can Do— Not What You *Can't* Do

Senior continuing care is one of the most regulated industries in the country. How we choose to comply with these regulations will make an enormous difference in how our customers, the residents who live in senior care facilities, and those who own and manage those facilities, feel about the service they receive.

by | *Wayne Toczek*

With the threat of funding cuts being the norm and financial penalties for non-compliance ever more frequent, owners and managers are tempted to take the service route that seems to have the least risk. On the surface, this makes sense. But when you look at the broader picture, does it really make sense to stop serving hot dogs because you are afraid the resident might choke? The hot dog is an American food icon. Wouldn't it better serve those living in our facilities if we looked at all of the resources available to us and tap into those sometimes hidden employees in dining and environmental services, so we have extra eyes to assist in monitoring the meal? With a minimal training investment, service workers are now part of the resident care team. A hidden benefit is these employees will be much less apt to take a shortcut that would negatively impact service next time.

The process of balancing risk and cutting-edge service begins with understanding the regulation, its intent and the outcome desired. Regulations are in place because of facilities that are not meeting service requirements. "Progress and innovation in the dining service program should not suffer because of the regulations or even budget constraints," says Oliver Walker, Vice President of Operations, Covenant Retirement Communities.

Service and food quality enhancements improve resident satisfaction survey results and marketing possibilities. Sometimes, it's just a matter of boiling the regulation down to a simple solution geared to meet the needs of the resident, not a complicated system to meet the requirements of the regulation.

Regulations require resident care facilities to have a planned menu, to post that menu and, in most cases, to offer the menu appropriately modified to meet diets prescribed by the physician. This is where resident dissatisfaction often begins—they have been making food choices without fear of the "food police" showing up, then circumstances require that they move into a senior facility where meals

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are planned for them. Regulations that require that diets be modified do not say how strict the modification needs to be. In fact, the American Dietetic Association takes the position that a very liberal interpretation should be used for seniors living in a medically managed environment. Would you rather have a piece of pie like that served to everyone else at your table, or would you think having a carbohydrate-controlled fruit is the perfect substitute? Quality of life is important to the management of many disease states, so why not serve a smaller portion of the pie to residents who have diabetes?

Food cold? Serving meals on time a problem? Are you going to hire another dining services employee or totally rethink the way you are providing service? You can add an employee to speed up the process. You can buy another new heat support system. Or, you can take a step outside the boundaries of traditional thinking—the way everyone else is doing it—and re-invent the way you provide service. How about getting tray assembly out of the kitchen? Better yet, how about getting rid of tray service altogether except for those for whom it is medically necessary?

Wouldn't point of service meal assembly feel more like home? Food delivered in bulk to the area where the resi-

dents eat, dished up and handed to them along with the beverage they have just chosen is much more like the way they have eaten all their life. There is no trayline going on in the kitchen, so dining services staff members are available to assist with meal service at a place where they can see the resident as a person.

When completing your purchasing specifications, think quality first. Which product best matches the needs of your menu, recipes, and flavor expectations of your customers? You may save money by purchasing a higher quality, more expensive as-purchased product. Yield and resident satisfaction may far outweigh the few cents difference between the right product and the least expensive product. David Hennis, owner of Hennis Care Centers of Ohio, says "Keep it simple and make it satisfying to the customer. The regulations and cost will take care of themselves."

What time do you get up in the morning? What time would you like to get up when you retire? Imagine this—you are living in your own home, arising at 8:30 a.m. because it matches your sleep needs and your love of late night television...and then you move to a retirement community where they serve breakfast at 7:00 a.m.—"State regulations," says the dining services manager, "and by the way, supper is at 5:00 p.m., state regulations." Regulations do not say what time meals must be served. They say that no more than 14 hours can elapse between the evening meal and breakfast the next day, unless a substantial evening snack is offered to all residents. "Offered" is the key word; the resident has the right to refuse the snack. Such services as continental breakfasts and snack carts provide an additional service opportunity and, with a little planning, enable you to meet the time between meals requirement.

Weight loss problems at your facility? Think food before supplements. Though traditional supplements have their place, real food offers more opportunities to increase calorie and protein consumption. Fortify the food items selected, offer an additional snack, use molds and pastry bags to present pureed foods that look like they did before they were pureed, or add food items, such as fruit bowls and finger sandwiches, to the afternoon hydration cart. What is the person offering these items wearing? Something that looks like they just came out of the operating room, or a restaurant style uniform? The answer will make a difference in the perception of the food being served.

Viewing the regulations as a challenge and testing the waters with innovative approaches to producing food and serving your customers will be one of the decisive factors in making your community stand above others in an ever more competitive marketplace. ■

Wayne Toczek is CEO of Innovations Services, Norwalk, OH. Contact him at (419) 663-9300 or visit: www.innovaservices.info.

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