

New home targets needs of aging mentally disabled

Welcome House center designed for older residents

By CHRISTINE GORDILLO
clbfreelancer@crain.com

With its new \$1.5 million Michael T. George Center for Community Living in North Olmsted, group home operator Welcome House Inc. is doing its best to serve people like 58-year-old Carol Patacca, who is aging and mentally disabled, a growing population that didn't exist 20 years ago.

Ms. Patacca, who is severely mentally disabled, lived with her parents until they were in their 90s. Her parents' deteriorating health eventually forced a move to her aging brother's home, where she lived until he could no longer take care of her.

It was her niece, Cheryl Burnett, who finally found Ms. Patacca a place through Welcome House in North Olmsted. She now is one of eight women enjoying the benefits of a new home that opened in February specifically designed for the aging developmentally disabled.

"She's just blossomed since she's been there," Ms. Burnett said. "Before, for the majority of her life, she was told to be seen and not heard. All of the sudden she had these new freedoms. ... She talks a lot now."

Ms. Patacca's story is typical of



ABOVE: Resident Dorothy Harris helps with the dishes at the Michael T. George Center for Community Living. RIGHT: Employee Kate O'Donnell paints resident Delilah Holtzman's nails.

the changing face of the mentally and developmentally disabled population as life expectancies have increased dramatically over the last two decades.

The life span for those with Down syndrome has gone from 25 years in 1983 to 55 years today, with many living into their 60s and 70s, according to the National Down Syndrome Society. Those with an intellectual developmental disability can live well into their 70s.

And, like Ms. Patacca's family, many post-Depression generation parents of the mentally disabled thought if the child was not institutionalized, he or she should be kept home and generally secluded from their community.

Today, elderly parents and care-

givers, who never expected their children to outlive them, are faced with addressing the future needs of a developmentally disabled son or daughter.

"We're getting a lot of calls from parents who are in their 80s or 90s, who have a developmentally disabled child at home in their 40s or 50s," said Tony Thomas, executive director of the nonprofit Welcome House, which operates 11 homes in Cuyahoga County. Often that call is coming after a parent has suffered a fall or stroke and no longer can take care of the adult child.

Aging before their time

Welcome House estimates that 1,500 to 2,000 mentally disabled adults living with elderly parents in



Cuyahoga County will need to be placed in other arrangements over the next five years, Mr. Thomas said.

"It's an absolute emergency situation," he said.

"She's just blossomed since she's been there. ... All of the sudden she had these new freedoms."

— Cheryl Burnett
niece of resident Carol Patacca

Catherine Rush, senior services manager for the Cuyahoga County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, said the county has been working in conjunction with the state for several years to identify such families, but the project "has not captured who we want" of this hidden population.

The state, in conjunction with 22 county boards of mental retardation and developmental disabilities, was able to contact only 62% of the targeted families with elderly caregivers in its project dubbed "Double Jeopardy," named for the dual needs of parents continuing to care for their child while dealing with their own needs as they age.

Ms. Rush's job, once these families are identified, "is to offer support to them so they can do some future planning so it's not always done in a crisis situation," she said. Often that includes placing the disabled adults in adult day care centers or connecting them with senior programs in their communities.

The need for elder care comes sooner for the developmentally disabled because the ailments that negatively affect quality of life in seniors begin much earlier in this population, sometimes as early as their 40s. Not only do they age earlier, but the process is more rapid.

By the time a developmentally disabled adult reaches his or her 50s, "they're having the exact same issues that people in their 70s and 80s have," Mr. Thomas said. Personal care skills, such as bathing and dressing, deteriorate much quicker than the average aging population as well.

According to Dr. Carl Tyler, coordinator of geriatric education at Fairview Hospital, a number of factors contribute to this rapid aging phenomenon. Many in this group "carry the burden of undiagnosed mental and physical health needs," Dr. Tyler said.

It often is hard for a physician to

diagnose a problem because the patient is unable to articulate his or her symptoms, Dr. Tyler said.

Also, decades of drug treatment for a particular disability often leads to

debilitating side effects as the patient reaches his or her senior years.

Creating the perfect fit

That's where a place like the Michael T. George Center home can help. It is Welcome House's first new construction home — funded primarily by businessman Tony George and his wife, Kristine, in honor of their son — and it was designed specifically with aging mentally disabled residents in mind.

Atop that consideration is the single-floor layout that helps with decreasing mobility of group home residents. Welcome House is in the process of converting all its homes to single-story structures, including a \$1 million rehabilitation of two existing group homes at the same location as the Michael T. George Center.

Wider hallways and doorways that accommodate wheelchairs make life easier for staff and residents. The single-floor layout also allows easier monitoring of residents who may suffer from seizures, confusion or anxiety. Textured vinyl floors help minimize falls, and lower counters and sinks that wheelchairs can slide under allow residents to maintain some independence with tasks in the bathroom and kitchen.

Ten private bedrooms allow for greater personal space. The aging population of mentally disabled also experience changing sleep patterns and dementia that often requires assistance through the night, and with private rooms, this can be done without disturbing other residents.

All this is accomplished without sacrificing a home-like atmosphere. On a recent weeknight visit to the house, the residents gathered in the family room area with staff to either bake cookies or have their nails painted. Ms. Patacca chose to sit and watch, but the smile on her face made you think she was just where she needed to be.