



Dan Benson describes how this senior home and health services provider is changing the industry in Indiana.

American Senior Communities



Eleven years ago, Benson was a co-founder of a company called Eagle Care, which became American Senior Communities in 2001 after a merger. The organization is one of the leading senior care providers in the state, with 40 separate operations in Indiana and one in West Virginia. Not every facility offers the same services, but the company's service line includes assisted and independent living, skilled nursing, memory care, long- and short-term care, rehabilitation, and hospice.

The company's success is built on understanding the needs of seniors and their families. American Senior Communities built this understanding by creating an organizational structure conducive to steady growth and good service. Despite its size and impressive growth, Benson said the company was careful not to grow so fast it forgot who it was.

"We are a value-driven business, and we are unwilling to sacrifice results. Many organizations focus too much on either the bottom line or their values," he said. "We're unwilling to sacrifice either, and we've deinstitutionalized our facilities somewhat through the amenities we offer."

The flat structure gives it the tools to remain lean and control expenses, while also giving it a shorter path from customer to caregiver to management. Rather than layers of supervision, each individual facility leader reports to a director of operations who reports to Benson's office. This allows managers to focus on frontline staff rather than worrying about satisfying the executive heads peering over their shoulders.

The company also gives managers the autonomy to shape their facility. Upper management created a list of non-negotiable aspects about the company that are standard at each facility. These

Seniority Matters

People are fed up with business as usual in senior communities, so it is no wonder companies like American Senior Communities can thrive. This Indiana-based senior care provider is shrugging off conventional wisdom, reforming the way seniors are cared for by running its business from the ground up.

"We have found the more layers you have as a company, the more you take the focus away from the customer," said COO Dan Benson. "We are a flat organization, with our focus directly on customer service."



would include branding, vendors, and certain programs and policies. Beyond that, individual managers and their staff can put personal touches into their facility, integrating it into the local community.

“Those people are closest to the customer and know the marketplace,” said Benson. “As we free people up to fit our facilities into the local continuum of care, we find great opportunities for internal growth.”

Internal strengths

The organization has grown through a commitment to resources. American Senior Communities invests heavily in people and facilities. Seniors are more likely to have satisfactory outcomes in modern, comfortable facilities staffed by experienced, educated, and satisfied employees. With happy customers comes financial success.

Facility investments and expansions have come through a combination of organic growth and acquisition. Last year alone the organization had \$60 million of new construction and campus development expenditures. To spread the word, the company even recently launched a revamped americansrcommunities.com. The new Web site has a user-friendly large print option, while online polls and volunteer enticements should help the organization achieve its mission.

Benson said one advantage of being a private, for-profit entity is the ability to have a long-term view. Rather than a focus on quarter-to-quarter earnings, American Senior Communities can look 10 years into the future. This allows the organization to commit in advance to facility improvements.

“One commitment we have, for example, is to replace resident furniture every five years,” Benson said. “We think there needs to be a freshness to the buildings when you walk in.”

Then there are the frontline caregivers, what Benson considers the company’s most important asset. American Senior Communities believes this business is a relationship-driven commodity. Everyone will one day need the type of care the organization provides our current generation of seniors. With that in mind, it has a well-defined

strategy designed to keep compassion as a key part of its identity.

It begins with one of the biggest problems in healthcare today. American Senior Communities strives to maintain consistency and stability in staffing at each of its facilities. It starts with facility managers and goes all the way to caregivers on the floor. Think of it as trickle-down economics. If a successful manager is on board long-term, it is easier to keep key personnel, which makes it easier to successfully serve the elders. This is one of the reasons the organization has a full-time trainer to help department heads improve leadership skills, a profit sharing program, and why CNA’s get the same benefit options Benson gets.

“We constantly talk about the fact that people serving people is the essence of healthcare,” Benson said. “If we can have consistency in our key leaders at the building level, it flows down to the frontlines, and the fundamental building block of who we are is that CNA providing daily care.”

But the organization doesn’t keep staff stuck in neutral. For employees desiring career advancement, American Senior Communities helps them advance. Benson said the organization has a strong tuition program to help CNA’s become LPN’s and RN’s. He said there have also been individuals who wanted career advancement but loved being a nurse’s aid. For those people the company created varying levels of CNA’s, complete with cash bonuses and pay raises for good performance. There is also a mentoring program where new nurse’s aides are brought along by an experienced aid. The longer the new CNA stays on board, the more cash bonuses the mentoring aid receives.

Going forward, keeping a market-driven focus and commitment to principles should improve elder care in the state. As long as Benson remains at the helm, that focus and commitment isn’t likely to change.

“We need to stay true to who we are and make sure we fulfill our promises before we look to the future,” Benson said. “If we do that and approach the future from a measured perspective, there is so much room for growth.” ■

—Eric Slack



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