

Residential Retirement Living Provides More Privacy and Comforts of Home

"Unfortunately nursing homes are the most socially rejected form of health care in the United States today" states Horace D'Angelo, Jr., President of Caretel Inns. Nursing homes are noted for their sterile institutional approach to care and oftentimes are designed as scaled down versions of hospitals. This approach is furthered by the extensive governmental regulations on everything. These regulations dictate major design configurations such as the number of square feet allotted per patient, the type of mechanical system to be used, the number of toilets per resident, the number of bathing units per resident, and to top it off the total building cost is limited by a value assigned by the state. This total cost cannot be exceeded. All of these factors push the status quo of long hallways, motel room type under window heating and cooling units, down the hall shower facilities, and institutional fluorescent lighting.

Caretel Inns of America decided to challenge these norms and they did just that with their Coventry House Inn nursing home project in St. Joseph, Michigan. Their goals were to provide residents with pleasant home-like surroundings, privacy and personal space, inviting hallways that enable socializing, and enhanced livability for handicapped residents. An obvious success, the project was awarded a prestigious "Spirit of da Vinci Award" in 2003 by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and the Engineering Society of Detroit. The da Vinci Award honors excellence in design and engineering for achievements in accessibility to empower people of all abilities.

While this project is a culmination of many innovations there are some highlights that stand out, the first being "Full Access Bathrooms." Government set standards are very low for bathrooms. Only one toilet is required for every 8 patients and one shower for every 20 residents. Standard procedure sacrifices all privacy for bathing. Residents are changed into a patient gown by a nurse's aide, put in a shower chair, and then rolled down the hallway by the aide to a common bathing room. Then they are showered by the aide and returned to their rooms. Full access bathrooms were placed in every room using inexpensive standard building materials. Cleverly, the entire bathroom was turned into a handicap accessible shower and at a reasonable cost falling within government guidelines. A central floor drain with sloped epoxy covered concrete floors drains the entire room. There is a lavatory and toilet, a hand held shower head, and grab bars. Full access bathrooms eliminate down the hall bathing and returns home-like privacy to residents. Residents who are capable can even bathe themselves, and there is less incontinence because each resident has an accessible toilet, which in turn decreases nursing costs. Full Access Bathrooms return dignity and privacy to personal hygiene for residents.

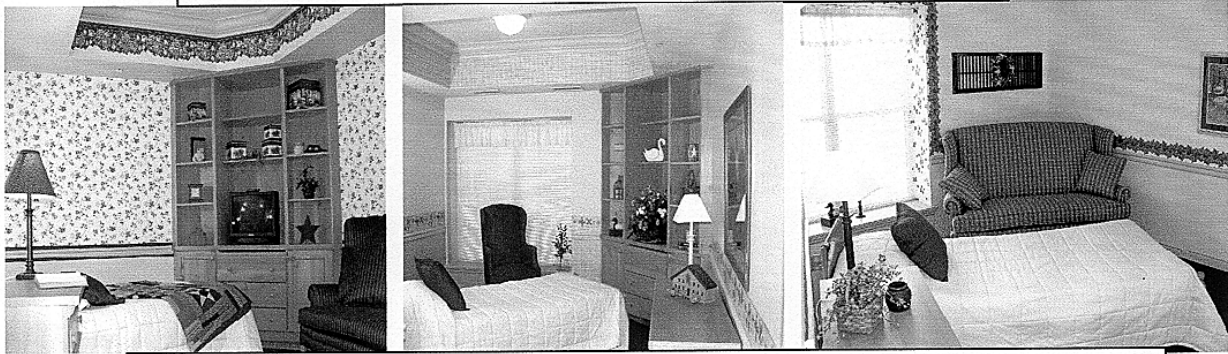
Numerous improvements were made to the resident's bedrooms. While these may seem small, there are huge in the face of pervasive restrictive regulation. Government standards state that a single room cannot be over 150 square feet. A resident's room typically consists of a bed, TV stand, over bed table, and wardrobe. Caretel decided to recess the wardrobe, and provide a built-in TV stand with additional shelving for family photos, and a slide out desk to write letters or do small projects. They also replaced institutional fluorescent lighting with wall sconces and lamps. Smaller stand up heating and cooling units were placed in the redesigned closets allowing windows to be lowered to 14" from the floor. A window seat is another welcome addition and gives families a place to sit when visiting. All these improvements make the room more livable, provide more space, and more comfort.

Other innovations include changing hallways from long straight 8' wide tunnels with no obstructions to scenic pathways with nooks for furniture and space for socializing. Lighting was softened and glare was reduced by installing periscopes and numerous wall sconces. Regulations require that all hallways be visible from nurse's stations. Caretel went high tech by installing closed circuit TV monitors to overcome this barrier. Sections of the building are now themed with what Caretel has named "remembrance decorating." This unique approach features an antique apothecary famous in the St. Joseph area; a hair salon, an aviary, an ice cream parlor, and a private dining room for family gatherings or resident pizza parties. Outside visiting areas include a gazebo, courtyard, and numerous gardens. Finally, family members are issued "family keys" and given a special entrance that is available 24 hours a day with no restrictions.

Sameness has plagued the nursing home industry since the 1960s. Caretel overcame many obstacles to provide a unique solution that fell inside of the existing detailed regulation framework. The Department of Commerce and State Fire Marshals were positive about the project. The results are also clearly positive. "If it looks like home, it feels like home." Caretel achieved this goal through innovative design and construction.

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Three Rooms at Caretel



"Down the Hall" Nursing Home Bathing Procedure



Full Access Bathrooms (FAB)

