

Grace Management Rolls Out Resort-Style, All-Inclusive Dining

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Grace Management has started to revamp its dining operations, introducing all-inclusive pricing and creating multiple venues throughout its 53-property portfolio.

Minneapolis-based Grace is the operating company affiliated with CPF Living, the senior housing arm of private equity firm Chicago Pacific Founders. The Grace portfolio has been built up through a series of acquisitions, so one major goal of its new dining initiative is to elevate and unify its approach while being more cost efficient.

“It can be difficult when you’re acquiring buildings from all over the United States, and they have their existing programs,” Frances Showa, national director of dining service operations, told Senior Housing News. “We want to make it new and exciting and marketable to a new breed of resident.”

The “Graceful Dining” approach has begun in Grace’s four Town Village-branded properties, located in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Birmingham, Alabama; Detroit; and Memphis, Tennessee. The goal is to roll it out across the company this year.

No more declining balances

Up to now, Grace residents have had a set amount of dining credits each month, which they would spend down. Showa wanted to move away from this model for several reasons. For one, she believes that senior living residents need a better value perception, that they are truly getting what they pay for.

“With an all-inclusive model, we attain that,” she said.

When residents have a set dining fee each month and can eat whatever they want, whenever they want, they do not feel nickel-and-dimed for certain items, she elaborated. In addition, it relieves residents from the hassle of having to manage dining credits.

The approach did raise eyebrows at first, from a cost perspective, as Showa did not increase budgets.

“My chefs were convinced that I was crazy and that they were definitely going to be over budget,” Showa said.

The first month, overruns did occur, but now costs have all leveled out, she said.

This is possible because residents' guests, including family members, are now paying out of pocket when they dine at the community, according to Showa. In the past, residents would stockpile their dining credits so that they could spend them on visitors.

"We did monitor our guest meals and visitors, and it was amazing, the uptick in revenue," Showa said.

The Town Village properties are at the high end of Grace's portfolio, which also includes more middle-market assisted living and memory care, as well as two communities in Maine that offer a continuum of care that includes cottage homes for purchase as part of a co-op. While the Graceful Dining model likely will have to be tweaked in certain ways, Showa is confident that all-inclusive pricing will be successful throughout Grace's different types of properties.

All-inclusive dining is hardly a radical idea, and in fact is common throughout the hospitality industry, she pointed out.

"It's what every resort in America does, what every cruise ship does," she said.

New dining destinations

Also similar to cruise ships and resorts, Grace is committed to having multiple dining venues in each of its communities.

Its traditional dining rooms are being converted to restaurant-like venues, with menus featuring standard items and rotating specials. Other spaces throughout the properties are being converted into bistros, 24-hour pantries, and farm stands.

The farm stands are a particular point of pride for Showa. They are attractively designed to showcase a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. For example, the farm stand in Detroit was built using a repurposed wooden door.

"I would love to do real farm-to-fork with a greenhouse and chefs cooking from that — unfortunately, that is probably not going to work for us," Showa said. "[So] we wanted to give residents a different way of looking at fruits and veggies."

The farm stands are stocked with items that are in season, which also aligns with Graceful Dining's embrace of the Pioneer Network's framework for healthy eating. The Pioneer Network is a not-for-profit founded by long-term care professionals dedicated to culture change, and it emphasizes resident choice and

less restrictive approaches to diet, with a focus on wholesome and appetizing ingredients.

The farm stands have proven to be popular and allowed Grace to back away from packaged, processed snacks, Showa said.

The farm stands also are not staffed, beyond someone restocking them as needed, so there is not a diversion of workers away from more labor-intensive dining locations. In fact, the shift to a multi-venue approach has not required any additional staff, Showa said.

The new bistros are typically located near the front of buildings, to foster a sense of community, and their menus feature more “fun” items such as pizzas and bratwurst. But dining options and venues are responsive to resident preferences — smoothies are big in Tulsa, for instance, but not in the other Town Village communities.

Going forward, Showa is evaluating what bistros will look like at other Grace communities, is adapting the Pioneer approach for memory care, and is contemplating other creative offerings to keep up with fast-changing resident preferences.

“The way that people eat is changing,” she said. “Right now, I’m looking at tapas bars with small plates. That seems to be the big trend.”