

# Starting a Resident Council\*

Most facilities have some kind of residents' group. Taking this into consideration, many will be looking for ways to make the group as effective as it can be. Regardless of whether you are starting a new council or improving an existing one, the same basic principles apply to making it successful.

A critical key to an effective residents' council is the attitude and philosophy of the caregivers. When the facility administrator recognizes the importance of providing self-governing groups, there will likely be little resistance to the establishment of the group. Additional support must come from other staff, including the nurse aides, who are convinced of the value of the council and committed to assisting residents in taking part.

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When you have the support necessary to establish a council, working out the details and maintaining commitment from both the administration and the residents becomes the issue.

In developing an effective residents' council, it is important to look at who is trying to establish the council. Often it is a staff member who initiates the effort. If residents are not supportive of the idea, the effectiveness of the council will be limited. If however, the idea comes from residents, there will likely be more

support. Whatever the source of the inspiration for the group, it takes only one interested and committed person to get the ball rolling, but it takes many people working together to make the council successful.

As the facility staff and the residents work together to start or improve a council, the following steps should be taken:

## 1. Have a brainstorming session

Call a meeting of all persons interested in organizing a residents' council. This includes the administrator, staff, families, volunteers, and most importantly, all interested residents.

During the brainstorming session, the group needs to:

- Discuss the value of a residents' council to staff, residents, and the facility;
- Review the information in this packet and then consult your Local Long Term Care Ombudsman Program for further assistance;
- Explore and analyze possible staff resistance to a council and discuss potential staff roles and expectations;
- Secure both staff and administrative commitment to support a council;
- Identify potential resident leadership;

- Consider possible resident apathy or resistance and how to respond;
- Form a committee of four to six people to plan an exploratory meeting of all residents to discuss the establishment of a resident council.

## **2. Conduct an exploratory meeting**

The committee should plan a meeting for all residents. A good strategy would be to schedule the meeting to coincide with a popular activity that a large number of residents would be expected to attend.

Unless there is a very capable resident, it may be necessary for a committed staff member to lead this meeting. The purpose of this meeting would be to:

- Inform residents of the purposes and benefits of a council;
- Share staff ideas and commitment to the project;
- Give examples of how councils are effective in other facilities. Invite a member of a residents' council from another facility to talk about his/her council;
- Lead a short discussion to identify the concerns of the residents and ways the council could address them;
- Take a vote to determine if there is interest in organizing a council; and
- If so, select a committee of four to six people (include residents, staff, and volunteers) to organize and plan the first meeting.

## **3. Conduct an organizational committee meeting**

The work of this committee can probably be accomplished in two meetings. It is important for the administrator to show his/her support for the council at these meetings. This can be done either by a personal appearance or sending a letter to the committee. Once support is received, the organizational committee can establish some recommendations for basic structure fairly quickly. This includes:

- Establishing the purpose and function of the council;
- Establishing the organization-al structure and leadership;
- Establishing the role of facility staff in the council;
- Determining the resident needs and concerns that are appropriate for the council to address;
- Selecting special projects the council could be involved in;
- Determining when and how often to meet; and
- Planning a meeting where all residents are invited to hear and vote on the recommendations of the committee.

After this process the committee should have the basic components for writing by-laws by which the council will operate.

#### **4. Implementing the plan**

If residents vote to establish a residents' council based on the committee's recommendations, the only thing that remains is implementing the plans that have been made.

Creating and developing a residents' council takes time. Be patient and recognize council successes, even the small ones.

While "big projects" are important and residents gain a sense of satisfaction from involvement in such endeavors, building a cohesive group where people listen to each other with interest

and respect is important. This takes time, and may be difficult, but your efforts will pay off in the end.

It will help to get your council off to a good start if early in the life of a council you are able to point to successes that are meaningful to a large number of residents. Some areas where a council might be successful include: a change in serving procedures assuring residents get hot coffee; establishing a committee that sends cards and letters to residents in the hospital; or conducting a get acquainted activity for new residents.

\*Taken from "How to Organize and Direct an Effective Resident Council," revised 2005, with permission of the Missouri State Long Term Care Ombudsman Program.