

# **Building Community Within a Geriatric Long Term Care Setting: Creating a Jewish Environment that Resonates as a Place of Attachment and Identity**

**By**

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## **I. Introduction**

Baycrest Centre is an integrated geriatric health care services continuum located in Toronto, Canada. This Jewish facility includes a nursing home, short and long term inpatient hospital programs, outpatient clinics, community outreach teams, supported living apartments, and a range of client and care giver education and support programs. The centre also houses two research units and is a teaching site affiliated with the University of Toronto. Baycrest's mission is to enrich the quality of life of the elderly guided always by the principles of Judaism.

This paper provides an overview of the planning and implementation of a comprehensive initiative aimed at redesigning how pastoral care, cultural and spiritual services and programs are delivered in this geriatric long term care setting. The interprofessional approach outlined in this paper is a collaborative partnership between the centre's rabbi, therapeutic recreation, occupational therapy, social work, volunteer services, and community leadership.

## **II. Understanding Our Needs and Challenges**

Over the years, Baycrest had developed a range of cultural and spiritual programming and pastoral care services for its residents (See Appendix A). As part of a regular process of program evaluation, surveys of clients, families, and staff and program audits were conducted to gather both quantitative and qualitative data about how we were doing in meeting the cultural, spiritual, and religious needs of our population. The feedback received and data gathered identified a number of challenges that we were facing:

- 1) Staff, families, clients noted: "not enough observable signs/symbols, palpable atmosphere" of holidays and special events. This in turn did not generate enough excitement or interest and appeared more of a perfunctory handling of the holiday than an enriching experience.

- 2) We needed to consider the needs of a range of observance levels (12-14% of Orthodox, and a larger percentage of Reform/Conservative/Secular Jews).

- 3) We also needed to consider the needs of a range of ability levels. For example, our clients were becoming frailer, their abilities to participate were impacted by vision and hearing loss and often some degree of cognitive impairment.

4) Clients, families, and staff representing the range of observance levels were concerned that Jewish identity and cultural/religious expression were becoming gradually diluted. At the same time, there was a feeling that we were not tapping into the full and rich potential that Judaic culture had to offer.

### **III. Reviewing the Literature and Integrating Research Into Planning**

A qualitative research study conducted by B. Stern in 2005 investigated the nature and meaning of engagement in the Shabbat ritual from the perspective of residents, family, staff. The study's soon-to-be published findings and a concurrent review of the literature provided insights into:

- 1) The nature and meaning of engagement in ritual: the prescribed sequence of activities, the common and shared routines, roles, and essential physical, intellectual, and social ingredients served as an important context for self identity and participation especially for those with cognitive impairment.
- 2) The mechanics of engagement: those interpersonal factors that served as either social enablers or detractors of engagement.
- 3) The role of the environment as more than just a location where people existed: We see our environment as a place that is a "centre of lived meaning" where social, cultural, and physical elements of a person's environment becomes one's place, a place that the person identifies with and that in turn identifies him/her (Cutchin, 2004).
- 4) The importance of social, cultural, religious/spiritual activities: Social, cultural, and religious/spiritual values and behavioral norms contribute to self identity and meaning making. They can also provide a motive for engagement in life and can contribute to the health and well being of the individual (Day & Cohen, 2000). An inclusive view of spirituality recognizes the connectedness with others; the presence of a supportive community can help to maintain a sense of spirituality and dignity in our clients, recognizing each person as one whose life can still have meaning and purpose (McCurdy, 1998).
- 5) A "caring community" evolves from an environment that resonates as a place of attachment and identity: It is important that organizations do not separate and compartmentalize planning, organizational values and philosophy of care and service from the meaning and relationship components of how care is provided as we believe that the highest standard of living for long term care residents (including people with dementia) is in a setting that knows the difference between environments that are "containers" of programmed activities and those that resonate as "places of attachment and identity" that actually nurture caring communities (Vittoria, 1998).

These findings informed our planning process and have had implications on how we educate staff, volunteers, others and on how we plan for service delivery.

### **IV. Reviving Our Vision**

We knew that our staff resources e.g. therapeutic recreation, portering, the rabbi were strained and stretched and that we did not have enough volunteers in the areas where we needed help. Clearly, we needed to pool our expertise and rethink our approach. Our needs and demands were greater. We needed to find a different and better way of addressing these challenges. A Jewish Culture & Heritage Steering Committee was

launched by a core group comprised of the Directors of Therapeutic Recreation and Occupational Therapy, the rabbi, a volunteer coordinator and the coordinator of culture & heritage programming (an energetic, enthusiastic individual recently recruited into the position). Its purpose was to revive and sustain centre-wide commitment to cultural, spiritual, and religious programming (See terms of reference in Appendix B). Community synagogue partners and client and family representatives were also asked to join the steering committee. Taking Baycrest's mission into consideration, the following vision was proposed:

To create a vibrant, participatory and integrated Centre wide approach for Pastoral Care, Cultural and Spiritual Programming.

We needed to balance the academia and research that Baycrest is known for with the essence of our meaning and purpose based in the values and principles of Judaism. We believed that if we could link into our spiritual and feeling side and revive an environment of Jewish cultural and religious identity which would be reflected in Baycrest's activities, programs, and processes then we would achieve our mission. Baycrest would offer a range of meaningful experiences that would meet the changing needs of the clients, families, and staff it served. By embracing our Jewish culture and heritage and enhancing our milieu to reflect this, we could help our clients, and their families to truly experience this richness in their lives.

#### **V. Communicating a Shared Understanding of Ground Rules**

We articulated together what we felt were important messages that needed to serve as the guiding principles by which we could respect the diversity of observance levels while living out our vision of a Jewish Baycrest. These principles were worded in this way:

- 1) We affirm that our **Orthodox foundation** at Baycrest must remain intact. We respect our Baycrest history, legacy, and founding roots while at the same time convey an inclusive message to non-Orthodox Jews by adding additional expressions of Jewish identity and observance. We want to **strengthen our existing identity while providing a vision of growth** that meets the needs of our clients, families, staff, and community. We want to sustain our unique identity within the Jewish community as that Jewish home for the aged that we were originally created to be.
- 2) Being mindful of a longstanding history of observance within the traditional format, we will now formally delineate between **public versus private spaces** within which people can gather to allow for alternate modes of expression/observance. Public spaces are defined as those spaces within the centre that all persons can access at any time e.g. open meeting spaces. Private spaces are closed off e.g. Meditation Room, etc. The key points to be made here are:
  - We need to be inclusive to enable all levels of observance and do it in a way that offends the least amount of people
  - We need to demonstrate sensitivity to keeping everyone comfortable
  - We must refrain from actions that some Jews would find offensive
  - We need to maintain an environment of traditional Shabbat and holiday observance
  - We acknowledge that we all have to live together and to do that we all have to compromise

- 3) We delineate between **program and service**. Service refers to religious practice/observance according to the theological beliefs of the participants (traditional=orthodox; alternative=non-orthodox). Programs are other cultural activities that can sometimes include religious practices and rituals.
- 4) We will maintain the **Jewish identity** of Baycrest (institution) as well as its constituents (person) i.e. clients, residents, family, staff through programs focused on:
  - Israel
  - Holocaust
  - Jewish culture (music, art, storytelling, food, etc)
  - Worship and study
- 5) All the constituents/players combine to create the **Baycrest family**:
  - respect for the diversity of beliefs, observances
  - respect for the non-Jewish parts of our Baycrest family
  - we all live/work together; our family may have different parts but we are committed to each other's wellbeing

All members of the Culture & Heritage Steering Committee, representing the range of observance levels, were in agreement with the principles above. These principles served as a point of reference to facilitate decision making that ranged from where the reform service with its use of microphones was to take place, to how an Easter tea should be conducted for non-Jewish hospital patients.

## **VI. Taking Action**

In the past 8 months, the committee has worked to articulate its vision, review current strengths, identify gaps and initiate an inclusive and systematic planning process to develop a multi-tiered plan with measurable outcomes, time lines, and accountabilities that addresses:

- 1) Baycrest policies on Kashrut, Shabbat/holidays, dress code, etc.
- 2) Environmental elements including signs, symbols, Judaic ritual objects, art that can serve to enliven and facilitate engagement and sustain identity
- 3) Activities: expanding the scope and offering increased choices
- 4) Community Outreach: linking with community partners, promoting and enabling community participation
- 5) Volunteer Recruitment selectively focused at communicating our specific needs and aligning volunteers where the needs are
- 6) Staff, volunteer, family education to provide training and build competencies in such areas as cultural sensitivity, communication, relationship building, Judaic laws and customs, etc. We are also including more focused training in understanding how to enliven environments and training in facilitating activity participation.
- 7) Staff and volunteer supervision and ongoing support to ensure that we continue to develop and mentor these individuals to keep them engaged.

The committee plans to evaluate its outcomes in the coming year and to measure how successful they were in implementing this revived vision. It is anticipated that the indicators of success will include increased client, family, and staff satisfaction, increased client, family, and staff engagement in cultural/spiritual activities, and observable evidence of an enlivened environment e.g. more prominent and palpable feel of Jewish identity/culture.

### References

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## Appendix A

### **Pastoral Care, Cultural and Spiritual Programming at Baycrest**

#### Pastoral Care

- Pastoral Counseling (on-site and off-site)
- Conducting Funerals and Unveilings
- Bed-side rituals
- Memorial Services
- Jewish Hospice
- Supervise Chaplains

#### Chaplaincy

- Jewish Chaplains in the nursing home and hospital
- Christian Chaplain in Hospital
- Grief and Bereavement Counseling
- Religious Services
  - Orthodox Jewish Services
  - Alternate Jewish Services
  - On unit and individual worship
  - Symbolic Programs
  - Ecumenical Christian Services

#### Education

- Ongoing Staff In –Services
- New Staff Orientation
- Religious & Cultural Study Groups
- Jewish Life at Baycrest Video
- Display Case
- Pre-Holy Day Messages/Bulletins
- Annual Calendar

#### Community Collaboration

- Community Rabbis
- Cantors,
- Clergy
- other Community Groups

### Culture and Heritage: Therapeutic Recreation

- Holiday Parties/Special Events (Jewish and Non-Jewish)
- Symbolic Programs (Seders)
- Lectures and Discussion Groups
- Jewish Music (Live and taped)
- Movies
- Traditional Baking
- Creative Arts
- Book and Music Library Services and Canadian Jewish News
- Language based programs (Hungarian, Yiddish)
- Volunteer Visiting
- Intergenerational Programming (Child Care Centres, Schools, Youth Groups, Synagogues etc)
- Oneg Shabbat, and Shabbat Dinners
- Candle Lighting (Shabbat, Chanukah and Yahrzeit Candles)
- Holy Day Services
- Yom Hashoah Service
- Enhanced environment (Display Cases, decorations and postings)

Appendix B  
**Jewish Culture & Heritage Steering Committee**  
**Terms of Reference**

**Vision:** Baycrest resonates as an environment of Jewish cultural and religious identity which is reflected in its activities/programs, and processes. It offers a range of meaningful experiences that meets the changing needs of the clients, families, and staff it serves.

**Purpose:**

The Culture & Heritage Steering Committee will work to:

- Revive and sustain centre-wide commitment to Jewish Culture/Heritage (keep the flavor alive)
- Raise the profile of cultural activities to link it as a broader determinant of health and wellbeing that significantly affects quality of life
- Maintain Orthodox core and offer a range of experiences/options to meet the changing needs of the clients re: their religious affiliations but also the challenges posed by aging/impairment
- Sustain the identity/ creating meaningful community/ enlivening environment so that it resonates as an environment of identity versus an environment where an impersonal (task-oriented; lack of knowledge/rote way of doing cultural/religious) approach is taken where religious/cultural activities are concerned
- Create new links with the community to support our internal environment and continue to facilitate the long term relationships residents had with their local communities and religious organizations
- Provide education to staff, clients, families
  - Nature, meaning, value of these types of activities
  - Strategies to enable participation and to “engage with” rather than “do to” within activities

**Role of Steering Committee:**

- Advise senior management on spiritual/religious/cultural activities in the centre
- Recommend ,where necessary, policies and procedures related to the above
- Spearhead initiatives creating action plans, responsibilities, timelines
- Oversee implementation
- Play a supportive role to Coordinator of Culture and Heritage
- Position and advocate for resources

**Membership (core group):**

Baycrest Rabbi

Culture & Heritage Coordinator  
Director, Therapeutic Recreation  
Director, Occupational Therapy  
Social Work  
Volunteer Services  
Nursing  
Resident/Client Representative  
Family Representative  
Community Rabbis from reform, conservative, orthodox streams

**Membership (consult status):**

Education and Organizational Development  
Food and Nutrition Services  
Public Relations  
Community: Other identified Rabbis  
Art & Environment  
Family & Resident Councils

**Meeting Frequency:** once/month or at call of chair

**Chairperson:** Coordinator of Culture & Heritage

**Accountability:** Program and Quality Committee  
Vice President, Professional & Community Services