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Safety & Security in the Senior Care Environment



Senior Care Environment is a term that includes many different types of healthcare facilities, including conventional nursing homes, assisted care sites, rehabilitation hospitals and even continuing care retirement communities. The number of Americans ages 65 and older is projected to more than double from 46 million in 2016 to over 98 million in 2060, and the 65-and-older age group's share of the total population will rise to nearly 24 percent from 15 percent (according to the Population Reference Bureau report, "Aging in the United States").

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Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964 are heading into retirement at a rate of approximately 10,000 a day², and this trend regarding the "greying of America" clearly demonstrates that the senior care environment is growing and therefore requires solutions to support the residents, staff and facilities.

Regardless of the type of facility, there are some universal security and safety concerns for any Senior Care Environment, such as:

- Crimes of opportunity, particularly the theft of valuables or medications.
- Exploitation of residents by unauthorized visitors.
- Elopement attempts, especially of residents suffering from dementia, Alzheimer's disease or another cognitive impairment.
- Workplace violence (against both residents and staff).
- Incidents requiring evacuation of non-ambulatory residents and the ability to quickly and accurately locate residents in the event of a disaster.

Due in part to these issues as well as the dramatic increase in population growth projected for the next few years, the need for suitable safety and security technology in the senior care environment is increasing throughout the industry. Technology solutions such as access control, video surveillance, duress alarms and real-time location tracking capabilities (as well as physical environmental issues such as energy management) should be designed not only to meet the needs of the residents and staff, but also provide a level of involvement and connectivity that families of residents will want for their loved ones.

Crimes of Opportunity

Many senior care residents still possess items of significant value, including jewelry, personal mementos and other items those that are vulnerable to loss or theft.

Investigating such losses can prove to be very challenging for several reasons, such as the lack of reliable witnesses due to potential cognitive impairment of the victim. This is one reason why it is imperative that senior care facilities have a process in place to properly document items of value that will remain with residents and urge family members whenever possible to secure such items elsewhere. Documenting such items should include full descriptions, photographs and where the items are usually kept. This should be updated from time to time based upon the resident's situation.

While everyone can be a victim of crime, the elderly are at greater risk since cognitive impairment can diminish the ability to make financial decisions and detect fraud.

The theft of a senior care resident's valuables is not only a financial loss but often, it is an emotional blow as well, especially regarding the loss of items with high sentimental value.

To deter such losses, staff at senior care facilities should be educated on the basics of crime prevention, such as:

- Appropriate visitor management protocols (identifying unknown persons in resident areas particularly after normal visitation).
- Cataloging of resident's valuables and common-sense security matters such as keeping exterior doors and windows secured after visiting hours.
- Reporting suspicious incidents in a timely manner to the proper personnel (See Something, Say Something).

Exploitation of Residents

Another common problem that many senior care facilities must deal with is the exploitation of its residents by unauthorized visitors. Such manipulation and abuse is often made easier due to a resident's willingness to trust others and due to the decline in many resident's mental acuity. Exploitation can take many forms, including "borrowing" money without the intention to repay, overcharging for real or fictitious services (fake salesperson) or using unknowing residents in illicit activity such as prescription fraud.

While everyone can be a victim of crime, the elderly are at greater risk since cognitive impairment can diminish the ability to make financial decisions and detect fraud. This is one reason that so many scams target the elderly. These scams include fake relatives in need, charity appeals, made-up lottery or sweepstakes, identity theft, and fake social media relationships.

Workplace Violence

While it has been well-documented that the healthcare and social assistance industries have the highest rates of workplace violence in the U.S.³, many do not consider that senior care staff suffer from an inordinately large number of these types of issues, with many taking place in a skilled-nursing type of setting.

State-run, public hospitals and nursing and residential care facilities were reported to have astonishingly higher rates of 145.9 and 222.4 per 10,000 fulltime employees, respectively.

In fact, in a 2019 Congressional Hearing regarding the protection of healthcare providers from workplace violence, it was reported that the rate of violence-related injuries for private hospitals in the U.S. in 2017 was 17.2 per 10,000 full-time employees. This is more than four times higher than the violence-related injury rate for workers overall in the same year. State-run, public hospitals and nursing and residential care facilities were reported to have astonishingly higher rates of 145.9 and 222.4 per 10,000 fulltime employees, respectively⁴.

Family members can become emotionally charged when interacting with staff, especially when there is any type of perceived mistreatment or lack of treatment.

Violence can also manifest itself in the form of assault by external sources, such as a domestic disturbance that spills over into the facility, or a family member who is unsatisfied with the treatment of their loved one. Family members can become emotionally charged when interacting with staff, especially when there is any type of perceived mistreatment or lack of treatment.

Verbal, physical, and sexually aggressive behaviors of residents against senior caregivers as well as against one another is also a danger, since a person may be cognitively disabled but physically capable of moving around the facility. Examples can include cursing and yelling; screaming at others; hitting, kicking and biting; and sexual misconduct, such as residents exposing themselves or initiating sexual contact with staff.

Sexual assaults of residents can also originate from external sources, including unauthorized visitors or the visitors of other residents, and without proper safeguards any resident can be at risk for these types of crime.

Resident Elopement

There are many types of senior care facilities including those with residents suffering from some level of cognitive impairment, whether formally diagnosed or not. Such residents are at risk for purposeful or unintentional elopement, the results of which can be tragic.

A purposeful elopement might be a resident that decides to return to their home or if they have access to a vehicle (i.e. at a retirement community) to take a road trip without telling anyone.

Unintentional elopements can include simply wandering away or getting locked out of the facility after hours and being unable to get back in (which can be deadly based upon weather conditions and the medical condition of the resident). This is one reason that effective security controls such as access control, video surveillance, duress alarms and real-time location capabilities for at-risk residents as well as staff education are critical to prevent such tragedies from occurring.

The use of such a multidisciplinary risk assessment process will yield the best outcome and provide more efficient and sustainable solutions.

Where to Start

Before a senior care provider begins purchasing this type of technology however, an assessment strategy should be employed to develop a comprehensive security management plan for the facility. One that includes physical environment of the facility, the education and training of staff, and the development of appropriate processes and procedures to effectively support the mission and operations of the care facility. The use of such a multidisciplinary risk assessment process will yield the best outcome and provide more efficient and sustainable solutions.

An excellent resource to assist in identifying the topics that a comprehensive assessment should include is the IAHS HealthCare Security Industry Guideline, 07.10, for Long Term Care Facilities⁵. This guideline, which is applicable to the many different types of facilities described earlier, assists its users in the development of a Security Management Plan (SMP) for their Senior Care Facility. This plan should include preventative and responsive measures designed to provide a safe environment for residents, visitors and staff of senior care facilities and the IAHS guideline categorizes this into four primary processes:

The Senior Care Facility Security Management Plan should be based on the unique environment, population and risks of the senior care facility and should address:

1. Violence, including aggression, initiated or suffered by residents, staff, and family or visitors. The “security administrator” should work closely with clinical leadership in implementing appropriate response strategies for this population.
 - Control of environment focused on wandering and elopement of residents and management of visitors.
 - Quality of care, including abuse and neglect of the resident population.
 - Protection of resident assets involving theft, identity protection, fraud, coercion, and drug diversion.

2. The senior care facility should develop specific security plans, processes and safeguards to mitigate risks:

- Training senior care facility staff on their role in securing the facility, protecting residents, responding to security incidents, recognizing symptoms of abuse as they relate to the population.
- Flagging residents who present a risk to staff, other residents or themselves.
- Identifying residents at risk for elopement or wandering and associated mitigation strategies and response.
- Developing a missing resident policy outlining responsibilities for search procedures and timely reporting.
- Establishing visitor control and access policies and mechanisms recognizing the frequency of access of family and other visitors providing support.
- Reporting and investigating allegations of theft, fraud, coercion, or other criminal activity.
- Screening of senior care facility employees given the vulnerability of populations with an emphasis on potential for aggression, manipulation, coercion or other acts potentially damaging to the resident population.
- Responding to other emergencies that may be experienced in the environment, including fire, evacuation, bomb threat, chemical spill and armed intruder.
- Identifying security sensitive areas.

3. The senior care facility should determine the use of security technology appropriate to the setting and risk level. Technologies could include electronic access control, video surveillance, duress alarms, and resident wandering prevention systems.

4. The senior care facility located on the campus of an acute-care campus should coordinate security plans and resources with those facilities.

Security planning should include the top security and safety concerns in senior care facilities. An IAHS survey⁶ illustrated the top four concerns from security directors and managers who have responsibility for long term care facilities:

- Resident Aggression / Violence
- Public Aggression / Violence
- Theft from Residents and Staff
- Elopement / Wandering

An organization should determine the appropriate strategy to address each of these concerns and how technology can be used to support residents, visitors and staff, as well as the operations of the facility itself.

The foundation for safety and security technology should begin with access control and video surveillance. Many organizations use this technology to control access and entry points for residents and guests and can also use it to restrict access when necessary. Creating a pathway for travel through the facility(s) and on the campus is a key measure of safety for the guests and support for the staff.

Using technology as a foundation, there are numerous methods in which it could be expanded to address these four safety and security challenges.

Adding to the control points should be video surveillance, to record all the daily activity at these entry and egress points, as well as any security sensitive areas of the facility. Additionally, the video technology should be used in the common (public) areas of the campus and buildings, providing staff another set of eyes and the ability to review previous incidents as part of any investigative efforts.

Using technology as a foundation, there are numerous methods in which it could be expanded to address these four safety and security challenges. Technology such as Wander Management or Real Time Location Services can be used to minimize the risks of patient elopements as well as abductions of residents, while Duress Alarms (in conjunction with appropriate education and training of the staff) can greatly minimize the impact of workplace violence.

Access Control and Video Surveillance can assist in validating the identity of visitors who are allowed access inside the facility as well preventing unauthorized entry, deterring crimes of opportunity and the exploitation of residents from external sources.

Creating a Security Management Plan and the use of a multi-disciplinary team to design and implement safety and security technology is a critical part of the security and safety management of a senior care facility. This, along with education for staff, residents and visitors and the development of appropriate and up-to-date policies and procedures are the cornerstones of a successful safety and security initiative.

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2000 Ericsson Drive
Warrendale, PA 15086