

Home Safe Home

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BEVERLY — There is a tidy, one-story house near a bend on Wedgemere Road that, aside from a ramp, blends into the quaint neighborhood of ranch homes. But inside, it is far from typical. That's because the house is designed specifically for people with Alzheimer's disease, from the absence of bathroom mirrors down to the soothing color patterns.

The features are intended to minimize the symptoms people with Alzheimer's suffer, like visual distortion and loss of depth perception, which the house counters with homogeneous, low-shine light-colored flooring.

"Visual perception changes through Alzheimer's," said Justin Devoe, program director of the Alzheimer's house. "They interpret dark flooring as a black hole, so we try to keep things light."

Anxiety and disorientation tend to set in at sundown, so the home attempts to assuage residents with large windows, sheer curtains, soft beige walls and an abundance of artificial lighting.

"Some folks with Alzheimer's experience 'sundowning' at 4 or 5 p.m. as the sun changes, and it creates confusion for them," Devoe said. "Lots of light improves the mood and makes the transition to nighttime easier."

The group home, which houses five residents, was designed for people with Alzheimer's disease, a progressive and fatal brain disease characterized by memory loss, among other symptoms. In addition to Alzheimer's, all of the residents at the Beverly home have Down syndrome, which is linked to early-onset Alzheimer's, according to Devoe.

"Everyone here is between the ages of 50 and 59," said Devoe. "You begin seeing signs of Alzheimer's onset in their 40s."

The residents are clients of Bridgewell, a North Shore nonprofit organization that serves people with disabilities. "We realized as our folks were getting older," said Robert Scholz, assistant director of residential services, "that the alternatives for them were very limited."

Tailoring a home to Alzheimer's

Bridgewell opened the Alzheimer's Specialty Program group home in 2007. The organization tore down a ranch that had been there and built a modular home, which was more cost effective than retro-fitting a home to the unique specifications, according to Devoe. An open floor plan connects the living room, kitchen and wide hallways so "the staff can be with everyone at the same time," Devoe said. Door announcers alert staff whenever anyone enters or exits the house.

Each resident has his or her own bedroom, which is painted the same color as the room they had in their previous group home — to evoke comfort and familiarity. The bathrooms and bedrooms have no mirrors. Instead, soothing scenic paintings are anchored to the wall by the sink. "Folks forget who they are in the mirror," Devoe said. "They think it's a stranger, and they become upset by their reflection."

Beyond the physical features, the home's staff has specialized training. That is key, Devoe said, because the treatment of people with Alzheimer's is specific, down to the way residents are bathed. "They lose their ability to bathe and their understanding of why water is coming down on their head," Devoe said.

The open bathrooms are equipped with a shower chair and handheld showerhead. "Bathing creates anxiety so we help them," Devoe said. "We start from their feet up and leave their hair for last so it's a more pleasant experience for them."

Sleep disturbance is common, so the home's 12 staff members include two overnight staff every night, one awake and one sleeping. The staff take residents to frequent medical appointments and monitor their medical needs, which are fluid. "Alzheimer's is a roller coaster," Devoe said, "so we do notice the subtle changes that occur."

Since the home opened, three residents have passed away, and three new ones moved in. "Everyone here is at a different stage of Alzheimer's," Devoe said, "and they will continue to live here through the whole process ... They never have to go to a nursing facility, which is important with this population."

Bridgewell, formerly known as the Greater Lynn Mental Health and Retardation Association, is a nonprofit that serves developmentally and psychiatrically disabled people. Among its services, Bridgewell operates about 60 residential homes, according Scholz.

The Wedgemere Road home is Bridgewell's first Alzheimer's group home. "I certainly hope we can open more," Scholz said. "There is definitely a need."

Features of the Alzheimer's house

- **No mirrors**, people don't recognize their own reflection which can be frightening
- **Low-gloss floors**, as vision changes, people with Alzheimer's see glossy surfaces as water or ice
- **Bathrooms with open floorplans**, patients with impaired depth perception don't have to climb in and out of a tub or shower
- **Shower chairs and hand-held showerhead**, patients are bathed from feet up to minimize anxiety caused by water on their heads
- **Wide hallways and doorways**, to help with depth perception and balance, and provide space for wheelchairs
- **Bedroom closets have curtains, not doors**; it's easier for residents to push a curtain aside
- **Light floors**, residents perceive dark flooring as a black hole
- **Abundant artificial light**, to abate disorientation and agitation at sundown

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