

An IDEA of inclusion

Lake Oswego, OR-based Eclipse Senior Living, which includes the Elmcroft Senior Living and Embark Senior Living brands, recently introduced the IDEA initiative to put a focus on inclusion and diversity within the organization. CEO Kai Hsiao spent time with McKnight's Senior Living Editor Lois A. Bowers discussing the importance of such programs in the senior living industry.

Q: Let's start with the big picture. Do you think the senior living industry is challenged when it comes to diversity?

A: Probably the best way to answer that is, you can take a look around at the breadth of diversity or lack of diversity at some of the senior living operators and some of the trade associations and you see it in that way. It's something you see in a lot of real estate-driven or focused industries — hospitality, retail development, multifamily. In the life cycle of industry, those ones are further along than senior living — there was some form of hospitality via bed-and-breakfasts back into the 1920s, for instance. Senior living wasn't really born until the 1970s or 1980s. I'm hopeful that as time evolves, what the faces look like in senior living start to change, too.

Q: What do you think the biggest obstacles are to creating and maintaining a diverse organization?



A: Let's start with labor in general. Are people even aware of senior living as an option for a career path? As more and more people get to know the industry, we can get to the next level: Are more diverse cultures and ethnicities aware of senior living, too?

Q: What do you believe are the biggest benefits?

A: Taking a look at the associate base is certainly helpful as you are trying to address the needs of seniors in general. The more diverse associate base you have, the more welcoming you probably are to potential residents and customers out there. All seniors aren't built the same. They are a very diverse group. As you see more

diversity in the associate base, you also probably will see more diversity in the resident base.

Q: How does Eclipse Senior Living define diversity?

A: We call it our IDEA campaign, and we have a whole program around IDEA. The I stands for inclusion, the D stands for diversity, the E stands for equality and the A stands for acceptance. We're talking about diversity

in terms of race, but we're also talking about inclusion in terms of gender and preferences, and equality and acceptance. We have a very diverse associate base, with representatives of different races and the LGBTQ community, too.

Q: Could talk more about the campaign and its goals?

A: We launched with some print ads. You can see more of the campaign on our website. We're using

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it in our recruiting channels, such as Indeed and LinkedIn. We are talking to various colleges and universities. For instance, I recently spent three hours at the University of Southern California Leonard Davis School of Gerontology with folks from China who are interested in senior living. We would love to bring on folks from that school as interns and train them, and then they could either stay and work with us or they could take their knowledge base back to China. We want to talk about diversity when we go visit other places, too — Washington State University and Cornell, for instance.

From an associate standpoint, we want folks to understand that we are welcoming to all, and having management that is representative of that message makes people feel more welcome.

The campaign is ongoing and will be part of our DNA moving forward. We'll be measuring how successful we are.

Q: Are there additional components to IDEA?

A: Our members who exemplify IDEA are having brown bag lunches with other associates. They may look around and not see any color, for instance, but there is a path, and we'd love to mentor them along the way. And also, internally, we spotlight diversity during our monthly communications. And if someone wants to use a floating holiday for Juneteenth or another observance, we've made that available for folks.

The ideas for the mentorship piece and the ability to take a holiday came directly from associates.

Q: Was there anything in particular that was the impetus for the program?

A: You know, it's interesting that you ask that. I'd never really seen



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color, probably because I, myself, am of color. I'm on the boards of Argentum, the National Investment Center for Seniors Housing & Care and the American Seniors Housing Association. The impetus really was just looking around going, “Gosh, this is different.” For the Hilton Hotels Board of Directors, it was an actual objective that they were trying to achieve, and I just realized that that hasn't really been done on the senior living side. For Eclipse, I think it's a pretty big differentiation between us and other operators, and I don't mean that in a competitive way. I just think that, if you look at our executive team, it is a little different than other operators.

As of October, 66% of our executive leadership and/or regional leadership roles are

held by females, 84% of our total population of associates is female, and 57% of our total population of associates identified as other than Caucasian, an increase of 7% since March.

Q: Have you received any feedback from associates?

A: Yes, we have. They've been complimentary. Everyone's been tired. So much has been going on, between COVID-19 and hurricanes and the marches and everything. People really feel that this is something that is positive and cuts through all the negative that's out there.

Q: Speaking of COVID, is it difficult to undertake any of

these initiatives, given the pandemic?

A: It is. One could be easily consumed by COVID. It adds on a whole layer of extra activity that communities have had to learn. But that said, the world needs to go on, and we still need to have progress. We felt this was important enough that we wanted to ensure that it wasn't lost in the shuffle.

Q: Do organizations that serve older adults have a heightened responsibility to work toward addressing ageism through their policies and practices?

A: Yes, they should. When COVID hit, we thought ahead and said, “This is going to be a constraint on labor” because some of the force will be afraid, or the surges will cause an increased need. So we purposely contacted former Elmcroft folks who had retired or were no longer with us. We provided bonuses to bring them back during this time of crisis.

Senior living is great. I truly do believe that people in the industry have a care gene in their DNA. It's great to tap folks who have that.

Q: What advice would you have for peers who want to improve diversity in their organizations?

A: Make it a goal. The best way to make a difference is when you put a focus on it and actually put some “meat on the bone.” That's what we tried to do. There are programs and initiatives behind it. My hope is that in three or four years, if we look at the management teams of various operators and trade associations, the composition will look different. ■