

The Role of the Residents' Council

Concerns come in every size in a long-term care centre, and Extencicare's residents' councils field them all. The councils play a role in the general management of the home by influencing decisions on subjects such as food, activities, outings, furniture, banging doors, sticky windows, and tuck shops...to name just a few.

Residents and staff respect and appreciate the councils for the way they improve communication and help residents maintain their self-esteem and control over their lives.

A council's effectiveness depends on several factors, the most important being good leadership. Council executives – president, vice president, secretary and treasurer – are usually elected to their positions by fellow residents.

There is a great deal of pride associated with being elected to such a position, and the executives take the personal challenge of doing a meaningful job very seriously.

Teamwork also plays a role in a council's success. Sometimes a council must depend on volunteers or staff to act as its hands or feet in getting things done. Or sometimes the general council sets up sub-committees to handle specific issues; for example, recreation, food and fundraising.

At some homes, the council regularly invites department heads to its meetings so they can introduce themselves to residents and explain their function.

Whatever the format, Extencicare residents' councils abide by a constitution and set of by-laws that govern their far-reaching rights within the home. When appropriate, council members take their issues, requests and resolutions to the administration, and the appropriate staff person prepares a formal reply in time for the next scheduled meeting.

Good participation is another ingredient for success. Depending on a variety of influences – such as the general health of residents, and the inspirational powers of council executives and staff – the turnout at meetings will vary from home to home. Some councils use creative methods to encourage participation. For example, council members at one home persuaded their activity staff to serve them their meal at a monthly luncheon – an arrangement that appealed in a big way to other residents, and generated enthusiasm.

Certainly enthusiasm is a large part of the effectiveness of any council, and this often has a lot to do with a resident's ability to use skills acquired earlier in life. Extencicare council members contribute far-ranging expertise from their previous roles in the business world, church groups or school organizations.

The act of residents and staff working together to improve the quality of life – in spite of occasional frustrations when personalities clash, or dreams are out of reach – is perhaps the most valuable benefit that a residents' council can bring to a home. Society, businesses and families share the same goals and the same frustrations.

As a wise person once said, "It takes a heap of living in a house to make it a home."