@ Home

Holiday Edition

**Brooke Thornbrugh**

Welcome to our At Home Podcast. Today, we have brought in a special guest to talk about the holidays in long-term care. Camille, would you like to introduce yourself and tell us how you're involved in the long-term care community?

**Camille Russell**

Well, sure, I'd be glad to do that. I am Camille Russell and I am the Kansas State Long Term Care Ombudsman. Ombudsmen are advocates for individuals who are living in nursing homes. We are in every state in all 50 states plus Guam, Puerto Rico, and Washington DC is the District of Columbia. So, we again are advocates for nursing home residents, it is an honor to be able to go into a home and sit down with someone and just be able to listen to them, learn a little bit about them and find out what's important to them, and how best that they want to be supported. All of our services are free, they are confidential. We don't tell anyone what they tell us unless they ask us to, we do have the ability to investigate concerns or complaints on their behalf. But oftentimes, our role is to provide them information assistance, and just to empower them to have a better life of their choosing.

**Brooke Thornbrugh**

Great, that's amazing. We are so glad to have you here.

The first question I have for you is what are some important things that you have found or anticipate are important to residents and families during the holiday season?

**Camille Russell**

Well, of course, there are some general things. But the first thing that we want to encourage people to do over and over is ask them. Like all of us, we all have different traditions that are important to us. And so, we don't know that if we don't take time to get to know them and ask them, almost everyone, though, have things people that are important to them, things to have, places to go, things to do, they have their rituals and routines and their culture. And so, talk to talking to each resident and ask them what they would like to do, and what would bring them joy and comfort during the holidays.

**Brooke Thornbrugh**

Yeah, those are also important and such important parts points to make that can be easily forgotten sometimes. What are things that families or homes can do to honor those residents' wishes during the holiday season?

**Camille Russell**

Well, again, you know, once we listen to them, and we ask what they'd like to do, to eat, to see to hear that we act upon that, that we listened to what they said and we act in that way. We want to honor that sometimes the holidays are hard. That is even before COVID but since we have had COVID, even more so. There has been extreme loss in many ways, not only in loss of life and friendships and things like that but they've had other losses that they've experienced. So not requiring them if they don't feel whether they're in a festive mood, and are they not asking them to expend energy to act like they're happy to just help us feel happier. If they are not wanting to do that, you know, don't make them go out to a party or quite frankly, leave the facility to go to something there. Listen to what they tell us and let them be in a space they need to be in. There's kind of a natural urge that we feel to make things look and feel festive and happy and most of the time they want to do that as well. But it's important that we do that at the right time and place in that were with them in that and not doing it just to make ourselves feel better though so ask them and then honor that. They do want to be with loved ones during the holidays. They want to see them typically, they like to share a holiday meal if they can, or be able to go home a lot of times, but sometimes that's not the case, either. Sometimes they are, do want to stay in the home. And they would rather have other ways to spend time with the people they want to spend with either there through other ways. So a tip for families would be to start right now to make plans for the holiday time based on what the person wants, what you're able to do. And if there's some extra details to having that happen, now's the time to make the plan, and not wait till the last minute, person-centered planning now for special outings in advance, sometimes make that whole event go much better for everyone. And it's going to vary. So, what do they want? What's important to them? And then support them in doing that. So just how can we support that happening approach to whatever it is, would that be the recommendation?

**Brooke Thornbrugh**

Yeah. And you touched on a little bit of COVID. But my next question, kind of goes with some of the things you talked about. What challenges do you anticipate nursing home this holiday season due to COVID? And how can those things be addressed?

**Camille Russell**

Well, there are still fears of COVID outbreaks. We know we are continuing to have COVID outbreaks, we do have new visitation guidance. And we will make it very clear that residents have a right to visitors at all times. And they have a right to leave the building and come back without facing undue hardships or having to jump through hoops to be able to come back in. So their fears exist. Somewhat on the facility side at times, sometimes individuals have fears they may not want to leave and go to a family outing. They may not want to do things the way they might have before and so we just really need to honor that. But if they want to they have a right to it is their choice to it is not it's not proper to have policies outside of that. And so we just need to support them in whichever way they want to do it. Nursing homes and thus then that means residents are experiencing critically low levels of staffing. We have always been- we've always known that staffing is hard, it's hard at the holiday time anyway. But there are critically low levels of staffing in many places. And it's going to be a challenge and even more so now at the holidays. We want to say thank you because we know that at any time especially now, that staff oftentimes are rearranging schedules and doing what they need to make sure that the residents' needs are met. Sometimes that means that therefore going to family events at a time they would have preferred to do so. We ask that you please not make residents feel guilty about that. That it's not their fault and they do recognize that most of them tell us that they may not always tell the people there that are taking care of them those things, but they do often already feel bad about that. And they shouldn't be made to feel bad about that. So that's probably a challenge that exists is making everyone understand that it is appreciated. Whether they say it or not, it's typically appreciated. We also know that facilities are having a hard time sometimes getting their food orders and that that may make it a little bit harder for them to provide some of the traditional meals they've always been great about doing around the holidays. As ombudsman, we love going in at the holidays and seeing that and there is usually that festive time and you see a lot of traditional meals that we know that people enjoy. They tell us that all the time but this may be the case more so that they really enjoy and they seldom get fresh fruit so that might be something for family members to know and for the places to know that if they can get some fresh fruit. You know that I'm old enough I'm going to be 60 here in December and I'm old enough to remember that you got the stocking even with the orange or the apple or fresh fruit in it and the candy in the stocking and they do. That is something a lot of people will mention and talk about so that's something that can happen. So, a little bit of fruit, candy, cookies, even pie are usually appreciated. Those are things, also mail. This isn't a challenge but I want to say this mail is usually something that's brought up to us throughout the year. But during this time Christmas cards not only receiving Christmas cards and getting mail but sending them out. If someone's able to take some cards in and help them the person with getting those signed at least and addressed, even if they are not writing their letters like they normally would be to be able to do that, they are still able to communicate, and they would have that return address that someone would write back to them. So, we want facilities to think too, we know that staffing is hard. Everything is hard right now, but they look forward to that mail. And so, making that a priority when it gets in the buildings, I am telling you, the residents know that that mail came in the building, and if it gets set down and doesn't get sorted for a while and doesn't get sent out, it makes them feel like they're not important. So, don't mean those things that seem like they might be little but are huge. Those are huge messages. And so, getting them their mail on time, people sending cards and letters, all times of the year, but particularly this time of year be great. And again, offering to mail cards for them. Another thing that we're getting better at I think, and that is being with people virtually again, residents have the right to leave, they have the right to visitors come in in person. But that isn't always possible. Sometimes, family members are there living somewhere far away. One thing that you could do is you can have someone set up to have a Zoom meeting, if even one person could go in and set with that loved one, and do that Zoom meeting with them, and have other individuals be able to come back and forth, whether it's a group or whether they do that one on one where the families gathering somewhere, even another state and some of the family members are able to call in and talk to each other. And something we've seen to be really valuable is if they have some things ahead of time, and they say to aunt or grandma or grandpa and they say "Would you mind if we ask you some questions? While we're in this, when we're in this meeting, and we like everybody, we're going to record it." So, everybody hears these things, and ask them things that they might not have known like how they met their spouse, or, you know, all kinds of fun things that you can ask. I've seen, I always remember one time, someone was asked about, um, have you ever been skinny dipping? It was a pretty fun and lengthy answer, you know, you might want to be careful with it. But I'm telling you, it made for a festive and light time. And it was something that you know, they're able to keep in the family for a long time and get information about the family and about that person that you might not ever have known before. So those are some things that we'd suggest.

**Brooke Thornbrugh**

Those are such great ideas, to address some of those challenges. And even, you know, they aren’t even big things that people have to do, they're even just as simple as bringing in fresh fruit or taking a little bit more time out of your day to make somebody feel more important.

What are other things that you feel like are important for nursing home providers to know, during the holiday season?

**Camille Russell**

Well, I think what you just said is probably critical and that these individuals are important and they have made this place their home. They have suffered much loss. We all have, quite frankly in the last couple of years, but them ever much more so and this is their home. And the providers need to remember that they're going to work every day in someone's home. These people have relied on their strong beliefs and it's what seen them through some pretty lonely days. They need to be heard. They need to know someone cares. They need to feel loved. It isn't about expensive gifts. It's about being heard, being paid attention to, asking them about their day, asking them what's important to them, how they need supported, and then acting upon on that. So, the bottom line is, and I think it's probably the end of what I would probably have to say was that just really control over their own life. I mean, we all want that. Right? And we have a right to that.

**Brooke Thornbrugh**

Yes, so important. So many important things to remember. Thank you so much for being on our podcast, and sharing the knowledge that you have, and sharing these ideas with people. And if anyone who's listening to this has any questions, feel free to email us (which you can find in our bio) and we can forward Camille your questions. Thank you so much again, Camille, for joining us today.