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Brian J. Berman | Chief photographer Silver Bluff RN Supervisor Kristie McCracken, left, and resident Mary Sue Shumolis shower affection on Honey, a resident canine at the care facility. Honey is part of Silver Bluff's Eden program, which is designed to make the facility more comfortable for residents and employees alike by bringing pets to live on site.

Silver Bluff serenity

by PEGGY MANNING

After a lot of hard work re-writing policies and re-training supervisory staff, Silver Bluff Village has received official word that the facility is one of the first health care providers in the state to be certified as a New Organizational Vision Award (NOVA) licensed facility.

The special designation was created by legislation passed in the most recent session of the North Carolina legislature. It recognizes the importance in the health care industry of creating a positive work environment for employees to reduce staff turnover and thereby produce more successful outcomes for patients.

The NOVA review process includes a thorough examination of all policies dealing with employees and the introduction of a coaching style of supervision to all "hands on" supervisors within facilities.

"This approach emphasizes joint problem-solving between employee and supervisor and encourages ownership and accountability," said Silver Bluff Administrator Bob Leatherwood.

That was accomplished with several day-long training sessions taught by Human Resource Manager Rebecca Ballard, Staff Development Coordinator Sheila Franklin and Lisa Leatherwood, director of nursing; using curriculum provided by the Better Jobs Better Care initiative funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to teach these classes. "In an extremely stressful and competitive healthcare industry, there is every reason to create a friendly work environment that employees don't want to leave," Leatherwood said.

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"When we first learned of this national effort, it was exciting and affirming, because we have tried to operate Silver Bluff Village using a similar philosophy for a number of years," he said.

Some examples are: on site child daycare, Employee Crisis Assistance Program, employee self scheduling, "de-institutionalizing" the facility via adopting the Eden Alternative with companion animals to make the assisted living experience more pleasant, employee appreciations and recognitions and other bonus and pay incentives.

Two dogs, seven cats, 20 birds and an aviary provide an atmosphere at Silver Bluff unlike the typical clinical setting.

Silver Bluff has four wings. Rather than being overwhelmed by hundreds of residents and staff, the facility is separated into "neighborhoods," with each section electing a mayor and a hall team.

"This offers a sense of belonging, not only for the residents, but for the staff as well," Leatherwood said.

Administrators are in the process of providing wireless Internet for the entire facility, which will be one more way residents will be able to communicate with family members and keep mentally active, Lisa Leatherwood said. "We offer a lot of incentives for our employees, such as stipends for training and recruitment bonuses," Ballard said.

"We also allow our employees to self-schedule within certain parameters," Ballard said.

Silver Bluff has 206 employees, of which 28 have been employed for more than 10 years, she said.

Silver Bluff also offers financial assistance to encourage employees to further their education while they continue to work. "We send our certified nursing assistants to seminars and we have ongoing staff development and retreats outside the facility for additional training," Franklin said.

Jane Reece, assistant supervisor over housekeeping at Silver Bluff, said, after 20 years, she continues to look forward to going to work each day.

"Lisa and Bob (Leatherwood) treat us like family," Reece said, "and before them, Max and Jean Longley were just as good to us." Turnover rates, which often reach 110 percent statewide for nursing assistants at nursing homes, can have a serious impact on providers, consumers and the workers themselves, Lisa Leatherwood said. "Our turnover rate has always been lower than that. We've accomplished that by better communication and mutual problem solving," she said.

Leigh Ann Reece, a certified nursing assistant and a mentor for new employees, said she has worked at other nursing facilities and is impressed with the cleanliness and work ethic at Silver Bluff.

Mentoring new employees is very effective in providing the orientation necessary to retain employees, she said.

"I never dread coming to work," said Reece. "I highly recommend Silver Bluff as a place to work."

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