

risk reporter

for senior living

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Avoid an elopement tragedy at your facility

Mary was a wanderer. She lived in a multi-building facility, completely surrounded by a fence, and spent much of her time roaming outdoors. Because Mary suffered from cognitive impairment, she needed to be watched whenever she was outside. But on a day when temperatures topped 100 degrees, Mary managed to get past the fence. Five short hours later, she was found dead of dehydration, lying in tall grass just blocks from the facility.

The Nursing Home Abuse Resource Center defines elopement as the ability of a "resident who is not capable of self-preservation to successfully leave the nursing home unsupervised and undetected and enter into a harmful situation." This definition is applicable for any elderly care facility.

Many elopements have a happier ending than Mary's does, but the risk for tragedy is always there. There are many steps you can take to help prevent this type of tragedy from occurring at your facility.

Assess—and reassess

Limit your resident population to those you can truly monitor and care for.

"Every prospective resident is assessed by our wellness director who is an RN," said Pam Tokarczuk, executive director at Van Dyk at Bald Eagle Common in West Milford, N.J. "We do a mini mental assessment and an elopement risk assessment and interview their family and staff from any previous facility. We are proactive in assisting families with transitioning their loved one into our dementia setting. In instances where our setting is full or not the right fit, we'll help the family find the appropriate facility."

Because conditions and situations change, ongoing reassessments are vital.

"There can be a lot of pressure to keep the beds full," said Karen Metz, Church Mutual casualty claims manager. "Residents' conditions typically deteriorate over time, and sometimes facilities keep people they shouldn't, either because it's a revenue source or because the family can't afford the next level of care. Don't do it. Any short-term gains are almost always offset by higher costs later."

Provide listed services

Families make facility choices based on the services they believe their loved one will receive. If your facility claims to offer bed checks every two hours or to have alarmed doors and locked wings, you must deliver.

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Keeping your visitors safe



(Elopement)

"In one of our cases last year, there was insufficient staff to do promised bed checks, and in another, a door alarm was turned off," Metz said. "If you don't follow through, you're putting your residents at risk of harm and yourself at risk of a lawsuit."

The Long-Term Care Legal Desk Reference: Understanding and Minimizing Risk reports that 10 percent of all long-term care lawsuits involve elopement and 70 percent of these involve resident death. Dave Meek, elopement specialist and founder of the National Institute for Elopement Prevention and Resolution in Topeka, Kan., reports that the average out-of-court settlement is in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and there have been awards in the millions.

Design for elopement prevention

The design depends on your population. Facilities with memory care units should make it easy to keep an eye on residents and hard for a resident to leave the building unescorted.

Dan Edwards, a senior associate memory care specialist with LRS Architects in Portland, Ore., recommends taller-than-usual exterior fencing—with no toeholds for climbing—and horizontal barriers adjacent to the fence that block escape if the resident does manage to scale it. Windows should only open six inches—enough to let in fresh air but not enough to serve as a means of exit.

A simple paint job can disguise doors you don't want residents to use. Dan Purgiel, the principal in charge of senior housing at LRS Architects, suggests painting doors to storage areas and other off-limits places the same color as the wall so they'll "disappear."

When building a new facility, it's a good idea to use a "neighborhood" layout style that has resident rooms on one side that open into a large, easily monitored common space. Create inner courtyards that are completely surrounded by your building and keep doors coming from the courtyard into the facility unlocked at all times.

Walk around your building and look for places where it would be easy for a person to hide. Avoid heavy landscaping that's hard to search and areas of tall grass. Make sure outbuildings are always locked.

Use technology wisely

"Technology can be a wonderful tool, but technology can fail," Meek said. "Use good back-up systems—both back-up power, like generators, and back-up human intervention."

Many facilities control door access with locked doors that are opened using a coded keypad or other device. Remember to change those codes on a regular basis.

"One easy way is to incorporate the month and year," Meek said. "However, don't have a code that makes a pattern on the keypad, like an 'X.' Sometimes a cognitively impaired

person will recognize the pattern even if they don't remember the numbers."

Fire exit doors should have alarms that are linked to staff pagers. Heritage Court in Menomonee Falls, Wis., has a pulse alarm for tampering and a steady alarm for door opening. Staff must check out the alarm each and every time.

Some nonlocked facilities use "WanderGuards" that are attached directly to a resident and cause doors to lock when a resident approaches them.

Watch for signs

You're likely to see patterns of behavior that might predict elopement. Put systems in place that require specific staff to document the location of specific residents throughout the day. Logical times include the beginning of each shift, medication administration and mealtimes.

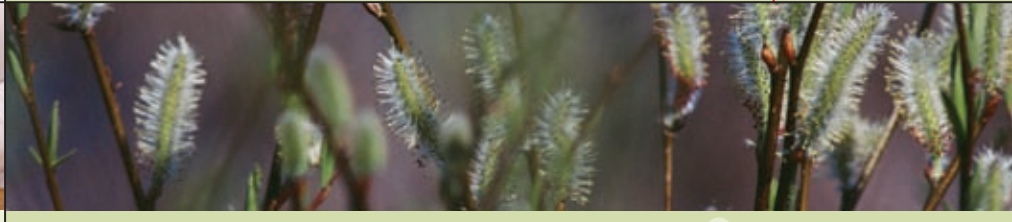
"All of our residents have some degree of Alzheimer's or dementia," said Katie Corbett, community director at Heritage Court. "We do two-hour checks, 24 hours a day, and if they're an elopement risk, we check them every 30 minutes."

If your facility does regular bed checks, make sure that staff can actually see the person in their bed—not just assume that something in the bed is a person.

Elopement response requires preparation

- Maintain a clear, recent photograph of each resident.
- Develop a detailed, documented search plan, including a checklist of the areas that each staff member will search—this should include all rooms, even those routinely kept locked; all vehicles on the grounds; dumpsters; buildings on the grounds; and landscaped areas. Don't use direct care staff to search; call in off-duty employees if necessary.
- Use a triple search policy—search your facility at least three times in the first 24 hours after an elopement.
- Involve the police—after an initial search of your facility and grounds, call the police.
- Involve the family—family contacts should be notified immediately.
- Use a buddy system for searchers—do this whether the search is on foot or in a car.
- Make sure that all searchers have a communication device.
- Hold at least one elopement-focused training session per year.

■ **For more information** visit the Web site for the National Institute of Elopement Prevention and Resolution at www.elopement.org.



Managing Your Risks

Avoiding distractions

On-the-job distractions not only take you or your employees off task, they also can be a serious safety hazard.

A quick scan through the claims files at Church Mutual shows numerous situations to prove this point.

- An employee is updating a resident's file when she is disrupted by a delivery service dropping off a package. When she returns to the task, she fails to enter a revision to the resident's diet requirements.
- An employee carrying a bag of trash to the outside bin is injured when he trips on debris and falls in the parking lot. He was watching a group of children at the playground across the street and not where he was going.
- A resident with a history of wandering leaves a facility at night unnoticed by the staff. It was later learned that the employee on duty was bringing her 6-year-old to work with her and letting him sleep in one of the rooms.
- A kitchen worker injures his hand on a knife while cleaning up after lunch. He admits to watching the television show that was on in the dining room while he was cleaning up.

Some of these accidents led to minor injuries, others required a trip to the emergency room and one tragically ended with a fatality. Proper risk control requires you pay attention to the incidents—what I call near misses—as they are a great indicator of an accident waiting to happen.

Although this issue may seem elementary, it pays to discuss the dangers of distractions with your staff once or twice a year. No matter how hard we try, we are all guilty of succumbing to distractions occasionally.

Richard J. Schaber, CPCU
Risk Control Manager

seasonal spotlight

Drive safety with effective transportation program

Summertime usually means an increase in resident outings. If your facility provides transportation services to residents, make sure drivers—and vehicles—are prepared to deliver the safest ride possible.

Screen drivers carefully

All drivers should be at least 21 years of age—25 is even better—and have a valid driver's license that they've held for at least five years and an excellent driving record with no moving violations in the last three years. All drivers should be subject to a criminal background check and random drug tests. If your facility has a 15-passenger van, it's wise to have drivers with a commercial driver's license.

"We also use the Predictive Index (a personality test) to help us find people who are likely to be a good fit with our residents," said Owen Gahagan Jr. administrator/CEO of Rockhill Manor in Kansas City, Mo. "We're looking for people with a caregiver mentality."

Train and observe

Training should cover a variety of topics such as vehicle operation, passenger policies—ranging from safe loading and unloading to dealing with difficult passengers—emergency and accident procedures.

"Once we have a person who looks like a good candidate, we take them for a ride in the van so they understand what the job entails," said Cindy Zwart, director of the transportation program for Senior Services in King County, Wash. "It gives us a chance to see how they interact with riders and helps us avoid an expensive training session with someone who isn't the right fit."

Wheelchair-bound residents should only be transported in wheelchair-appropriate vehicles—don't just remove the seats from a standard van and use that. If your vehicles have wheelchair lifts, all drivers should learn how to appropriately secure both the resident in the chair and the chair in the vehicle. And teach staff how to provide assistance as riders enter and exit the van, without doing any actual lifting or weight bearing or awkward bending that could result in employee injury.

Extensive training is especially important if drivers will be using large 15-passenger vans that handle differently than smaller vehicles and are more prone to rollovers. At Rockhill Manor, only three supervisors are allowed to drive the larger vans.

Maintain your vehicles

The right maintenance protects your financial investment and also can deliver peace of mind. Follow the maintenance schedule recommended by the manufacturer and have the driver do a visual inspection of the vehicle before they get into the vehicle and inside the vehicle and when they return to the facility.

- **Resource** Church Mutual provides additional information regarding driving 15-passenger vans and other safe driving and maintenance tips. Go to www.churchmutual.com and click on Safety Resources.

Q | a

A Perspective

Facility administrators and staff work hard every day to create a safe, pleasant environment for their residents and each other. But is your facility also designed to handle a rambunctious eight-year-old who comes to visit grandma? And can it be easily navigated by an elderly visitor who's not familiar with your facility's layout?

We spoke with Dennis Cassidy, owner and director of Walden III

in Wind Gap, Pa., who's in charge of the day-to-day management of his facility and also helped to design its original construction.



Risk Reporter: What are some things to consider when creating an environment that's safe for visitors?

D. Cassidy: Assisted living environments are inherently safer than many places simply because of the population we serve. In most instances, the safeguards that you've already put into place to meet your residents' needs also will protect your visitors.

Risk Reporter: What are some policies that help to eliminate safety issues with visitors?

D. Cassidy: You need to do everything you can to prevent access to dangerous items. This means that your medical cart can never be left unattended. Cleaning supplies should be kept in a locked cupboard or closet. The kitchen also should be locked any time there isn't an employee in it. We have lids on any trash containers that are in a public area, and our dumpster has a fence around it.

Risk Reporter: What are some things that people might overlook?

D. Cassidy: Burned out lights are a good example. If you know that your lightbulbs tend to last a certain amount of time, replace them on a schedule so that you're not running the risk of a dark hallway. We train our employees to be on the lookout for the frayed carpet edge or the loose toilet seat—anything that could compromise someone's safety.

Risk Reporter: What about trip-and-slip hazards?

D. Cassidy: Vigilance is key. In the winter, you have to be extremely aware of cycles where you have freezing and thawing and really stay on top of icy patches in your parking lot and on your walkways and entrances. We have nonslip mats to help us deal with weather issues that can cause slippery floors. Certainly you never want to have cords that can trip people or cleaning supplies or carts left where they'll be in someone's way.

Risk Reporter: How can you create a safe environment for children?

D. Cassidy: We try to eliminate temptation when we can. Exercise rooms and equipment can be a real magnet for kids. We keep the equipment locked away so that kids can't access it and hurt themselves. When the weather is nice, our grounds are very popular. We make sure that tools and things like lawn care chemicals are never left unattended. Because of our location, there are catch basins outside that often have standing water in them. These are grated to keep people out. And exterior buildings are locked at all times.

Risk Reporter: I understand that your facility has pets and allows pets to visit. What safety precautions do you take?

D. Cassidy: We know how much our residents love animals, but our standard is that everyone has the right to be safe, and we don't allow animals to compromise that. We have cats on site, and they've all had their appropriate shots and medical care. If a visitor wants to bring a pet in, they need paperwork from their vet to prove it's had all its shots, and dogs have to be on a leash when they're in common areas.