

Senior Living Business

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Best Practices Q&A

Jeff Kirschner, Executive Director Kingsley Manor

Kingsley Manor, a Front Porch community located in Hollywood, California, offers an intergenerational Students in Residency program. We spoke with Executive Director Jeff Kirschner to learn about the program and how it benefits residents, students, and the community.

What is the Students in Residency program? Graduate students in gerontology from neighboring universities (USC and UCLA) participate in the Students in Residency program. They live at our community for free in exchange for volunteering their services for 16 hours each week. The program has been around for more than 25 years, but we've given it more structure in recent years. For example, we now require participating students to comply with a background check, a physical examination, and fingerprinting just as if they were employees. And they provide an agreed-upon weekly schedule of volunteer time.

How many students are involved each year? Typically, we have three or four students residing at Kingsley Manor, and some students spend more than one year. As long as they're actively involved, we're happy with them, and they're happy with us, it's not uncommon for them to stay in the program for a couple of years.

What is the appeal for the students? These are all grad students who are generally research-oriented or policy-oriented. This program gives them a chance to experience the practical side rather than just theoretical work. They have a hands-on experience working with the elderly, which often reinforces their career choice—or, on the other hand, they may decide it isn't something they want to spend the rest of their lives doing. Most students seem to love the program. We have several applicants every year without any advertising. It's all word of mouth.

What does the volunteer work entail? It depends on the individuals, their talents, and their skills. We tell them our needs, and they tell us what they'd like to do. The students work primarily with the residents; most of the time, it's some kind of activity-related involvement: computer classes, Tai Chi classes, bedside programs, and so forth. We're very excited that one of our new student residents plays the piano, for example. Another student leads a program called, "My Story, Your Story," in which

residents come together to talk with the student and also with each other about their life stories, sometimes recording them on closed circuit TV. And another student is really knowledgeable about computers. Four years ago, we couldn't interest any residents in the Internet; now, computer activity among residents has just blossomed. So this program is a great way for students to share their talents or skills with residents in a real-life way.

How else do residents benefit? Residents benefit from the exposure to younger people, if only by having meals with an interesting, dynamic person who asks questions. We tell student volunteers that it's not good enough just to do the 16 hours a week. We want them to really live here, to take meals with the residents, to participate in social activities, and to be here when we have special events so that they're perceived as part of the community.

And how does the organization benefit? First, we have happy residents. The program helps create an active environment for them. And it gives us additional people to provide activities that otherwise wouldn't be available. Also, students may cover the switchboard or do other emergency work, if necessary. So we have extra hands when and where we might need them.

Does any other community in the country have this type of program? Another Front Porch community, **The Alhambra**, which is nearby in Alhambra, California, began a Students in Residency program about 18 months ago. They've had good success, as well.

Will this program roll out to other Front Porch communities? Kingsley Manor is convenient to USC, which has a wonderful gerontology program. Other communities may or may not have a local university nearby with that type of program. Whether such a program will work really is an individual decision.

Could this type of program fill empty units for communities with occupancy levels below normal? That's absolutely not the point of the Students in Residency program. The purpose is to provide an intergenerational environment for residents so they don't feel isolated from younger folks. The program allows residents to learn and grow through the knowledge and life experiences of the students. And it allows the students to learn and grow through what is essentially a laboratory for their gerontology studies. This program is not about empty units at all. We would make room for the program even if no units were available. □

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