



FAIR ACRES— DELIVERING FOR SENIORS

Nursing home OPL combines efficiency, organization and teamwork to maximize service, while controlling costs

By Jack Morgan

As some 76 million baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) reach retirement age, it's widely anticipated that demand for nursing home services will expand geometrically in the next few years. Many laundry operators in healthcare and other commercial sectors have targeted in-house nursing home laundries for outsourcing, particularly the processing of flatwork goods, but in some cases patient apparel as well. The idea is to add business, while enabling nursing home managers to reallocate staff and budget resources to patient care and food services at these institutions.

This trend could deliver a win-win for both laundries and nursing homes as labor costs and employee scarcity

increases—driven by minimum-wage hikes, coupled with today's full-employment economy. On top of that, there is the cost of maintaining and upgrading equipment to ensure a smooth-running on-premise laundry (OPL) operation. While many operators may see nursing home laundries in general as “low hanging fruit” for outsourcing, there are exceptions. One example that we recently visited is the Laundry Department at Fair Acres Geriatric Center in Lima, PA. This facility stands out as a nursing home OPL that's unlikely to outsource anytime soon. The reasons include its well-trained staff, coupled with adequate space in a stand-alone building for the use of automated wash aisle equipment, including a recent upgrade to a PulseFlow® tunnel washer from Pellerin Milnor Corp.

Assistant Director Robert Wilson, a 27-year veteran of Fair Acres, noted that the center's in-house laundry had its new tunnel installed in September 2017. The process began in 2015 when Director Joseph Artmont presented a proposal to Fair Acres Administrator Bill D'Amico. He OK'd the purchase. Artmont then presented the proposal to the Delaware County Council, which approved the tunnel acquisition for the laundry in this

county-owned and operated facility. Fair Acres' original effort to automate the plant goes back much further. “Actually, when we got our first tunnel, it was more like 19 years ago,” Wilson says.

With extensive water reuse, the tunnel processes flatwork at a rate of roughly .85 gallons per lb., Wilson says. With the savings and efficiency that automated equipment provides, he says Fair Acres can justify the costs of insourcing laundry operations for the roughly 650 residents who live in the complex, which includes a mix of five low-rise and one 11-story building. The people who live here are mainly elderly, but the population also includes younger adults with disabilities that require 24-hour care.

The complex has a number of nonresident buildings as well, including county offices, a materials handling center and, in building #18, the roughly 12,000-square-foot laundry operation that serves the resident population. The laundry processes both bed and bath linens as well as resident clothing. Wilson led our tour of the plant on a sunny, blustery day last fall.

PLANT—STREAMLINED EFFICIENCY

Our tour began in the soil area. At the rear of the building is the soil dock. Each morning, two box trucks drive around to storage areas where soiled goods are kept in each of the resident buildings. Staff bring these carts and bags loaded with soiled items back the laundry. Here, it's weighed and raised up on a hoist from Fairfield Laundry Machinery Co. and stored in a ceiling area to await processing. All flatwork items, including sheets, towels, pillowcases and similar items are dispatched to the tunnel using a software program from Milnor. Laundry chemicals are dispensed automatically through an injection system from U.N.X. Inc. Personal clothing—with each item individually labeled with the owner's name—goes onto carts and is moved by staff for processing in one of several washer/extractors. "We label just about everything, shoes, socks, hats. ..." Wilson says. We'll return to this part of the operation shortly.

The Fair Acres tunnel washer features eight, 100 lb. modules. Goods move via an overhead rail system to the tunnel, which is walled off from the clean side of the plant to help ensure proper hygiene. After processing, goods enter a press to squeeze out excess water. Every few minutes, "cakes" of clean, pressed linens that resemble giant aspirin tablets emerge from the press and move via conveyor to a bank of four 200 lb. dryers. Each load includes two 100 lb. batches of goods from the tunnel. After drying, goods drop into carts on the finishing side of the plant for the next phase of processing in ironers or folding equipment.

As for resident clothing, these goods are loaded by hand into one of four Milnor washer/extractors (2 200 lb.; 1 150 lb.; 1 55 lb.). They're then moved to one of three 75 lb. Milnor dryers. The next step is sorting. We watched as two or three employees from the laundry's 31-member full-time staff, sorted goods and placed items on hangers or bags for movement by truck back the residential buildings. "They'll bag it up," Wilson said. "It should be returned to them

(residents) in 2-3 days." Family members often will take care of laundering delicate items that aren't likely to do well in institutional equipment, he adds. On rare occasions an item gets lost, but the labeling system, plus hand sorting—while labor-intensive—ensures that in most cases residents get all their clothing back in a timely fashion. Overall, the plant's staff, which works two staggered shifts six days a week, processes roughly 6,000 lbs. daily, or 1.98 million lbs. total in 2017.

On the finishing side, we watched as employees fed small-piece flatwork items into one of two small-piece feeder/folders from Chicago Dryer Co. The plant also has a single ironer line, also from Chicago Dryer, which is used to press sheets and pillowcases. Resident clothing doesn't receive pressing.

Finished goods are placed on carts designated for specific buildings and moved onto trucks for delivery back to the residents. Flatwork items are placed in linen-storage areas in each building for distribution by staff to residents.

BELOW: (l/r) Wash aisle equipment in the plant includes a chemical-injection system; goods in slings hung from an overhead rail system prepare to drop into a tunnel washer; clean wet goods move from a tunnel press on a shuttle to the dryers. On the opening page is a view of the plant with the front entrance at right.



If something goes wrong, the Fair Acres laundry has an emergency plan in place to deal with the unexpected. As for utilities, the laundry gets its steam piped in from a central boiler on another part of the campus. This equipment powers the entire complex. The laundry also has maintenance staff to perform basic upkeep on the laundry machinery. If something major goes awry, staff will contact a nearby Milnor distributor to request help. In a worst-case scenario—let's say a flood or tornado put the laundry out of commission for a few days—staff have access to a backup supply of 2–3 days' worth of clean new linens that are stored on-site in a tractor-trailer for use in an emergency.

Under normal conditions, the plant can easily keep pace with demand for its services. The laundry has a simple, straightforward layout from incoming soil through to pack-out. We were struck by its streamlined efficiency and the relatively high degree of automation that we saw in place at Fair Acres.

DISTRIBUTION: SIMPLE AND SECURE

After the tour, we took a quick ride in a delivery truck to visit a couple of the buildings where the clean textiles are stored and soiled items are collected. In the campus's Resident Care Building No. 8, the 11-floor high-rise,

Fair Acres—A Tradition of Caring Since 1807

Fair Acres Geriatric Center, owned and operated by Delaware County, PA, is a residential skilled nursing facility for elderly and disabled adults. Its roots in the area stretch back more than 200 years.

In 1807, a county home was established in Media, PA, about 30 miles west of Philadelphia. The home operated there for 50 years before moving to its current site in nearby Lima on a 210-acre farm on Middletown Road owned by Abraham Pennell. The farm was called "Fair Acres." County officials retained the name for their facility.

In the early days, the home cared for entire families, as well as individuals, in a self-contained environment. Part of the property was used to produce food for residents until 1967, when the facility shifted its focus to caring for elderly residents who required nursing care. In 1978, the center adopted its current name, Fair Acres Geriatric Center. Today, Fair Acres provides care for 650 elderly and disabled residents.



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ABOVE: (from top) Assistant Director Robert Wilson (at right) stands by the shed used to drop off residents' personal clothing for labeling. Once inside, staff or residents drop bags of clothing into a chute; it lands in a secure part of the shed. An employee uses a heat seal machine to put labels in each item of clothing. (l/r) Wilson, Driver Ben Hurwitz and Supervisor Ed Pierce stand beside (and in) a Fair Acres truck.

Wilson showed us a linen closet with a coded lock that gives housekeeping staff access in order pick up clean linens for patient rooms. Similar secured closets are located on each floor. "They don't want residents to just walk in there and take stuff," Wilson says, noting that the system helps keep linen losses to a minimum. "It's a big place, but it works well." In this building, soiled items are dropped down chute in a storage area and then picked up around 4 a.m. each morning for processing in the plant. In the low-rise buildings, soiled linen bags are available on each floor for daily collection.

Wilson also showed us a special shed where new arrivals to the center can have their clothing dropped off for labeling. Staff provide residents with a sheet of paper where they record their name and room number. The paper then goes into a bag with the clothing that's put in the shed. A resident or staff member then opens a door and drops the clothing through a hatch. It drops down into a secure area on the other side of the shed. Laundry staff unlock the shed from behind and pick up the bags in the secure area and take them to the laundry for labeling. We saw the labeling process in action in the laundry's administrative office. An employee there uses a computer program to call up the resident's name, building and room number. Then labels are printed out for each item of clothing. A heat seal machine from Thermopatch is used to place the labels permanently in each item of clothing. It's a quick and simple process that helps ensure that resident's clothing is consistently returned to its rightful owner.

SAFETY, CROSS-TRAINING AND RECRUITMENT/RETENTION

To keep the cycle of laundering moving smoothly year-round, Fair Acres laundry provides cross-training to its entire staff to enable them to cover for co-workers who are ill or on vacation. Shifting people to different jobs also makes the work more challenging and reduces the ergonomic strain of repetitive tasks, Wilson

says. “Everybody is basically trained on how to do everything down here. Everybody knows how to work on the flat-work machine, goes back in the soiled linen room, does regular clothing, stuff like that.” Employees rotate weekly and their training in multiple jobs helps the laundry ensure consistent quality performance.

All laundry employees also participate in up to two days of safety training and take safety refresher courses at regular intervals to minimize the risk of incidents. “We go over safety measures twice a year just to make sure everybody’s up to standards on the machines and how to do everything properly,” Wilson says.

While staff turnover is low, in today’s robust economy, Fair Acres faces challenges when an employee retires or moves on to pursue other interests. One such employee recently left the Fair Acres Laundry Department to pursue a career as a rap artist. We saw his photo pinned to a bulletin board. For new hires, the biggest risk period for attrition typically is in the first few days after they’re hired. “A lot of times, we try somebody, then maybe a week before they’re supposed to start, something happens, and we have to start the process all over again,” Wilson says. Word-of-mouth referrals from existing employees help fill the gaps.

BOOMERS FACE DEMOGRAPHIC DESTINY

Wilson estimates that Fair Acres currently operates at about 75% of maximum occupancy. There’s room for growth, but in recent years the number of residents at this publicly owned facility here has remained stable. “It pretty much stays steady,” he says. “We’re not at full capacity right now.”


That could change as the demographic clock ticks and more baby boomers require greater levels of care and the kind of a services that a skilled nursing facility like this one can provide. If such growth should materialize in the near term, the Fair Acres Laundry Department seems

well prepared to respond to increased demand with its automated wash aisle, coupled with its simple, yet highly accountable system for distributing and managing the flow of clean and soiled textiles across the campus.

While Fair Acres leadership will always have the option of outsourcing its

laundry program, it’s clear that—for now at least—that this OPL is delivering a quality laundry program to residents who rely on its services 365 days a year.

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 **JACK MORGAN** is senior editor of *Textile Services*. Contact him at 877.770.9274 or jmorgan@trsa.org.



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