

## Guidance on Culture Change for Nursing Home Quality Improvement

*Culture is not an initiative.  
Culture is the enabler of all initiatives.*

~ Larry Senn

Over the course of this year, Moving Forward Coalition members joined with the Live Oak Project to reflect on the connection between efforts to realize recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in its landmark 2022 report: *The National Imperative to Improve Nursing Home Quality: Honoring Our Commitment to Residents, Families, and Staff* and the decades-old movement to transform nursing home culture. Beyond the report's multiple references to culture change, a working assumption in the Moving Forward processes is that continuous strategic planning and advancing deliverables that accelerate change must be foundationally linked to the culture that binds our efforts together.

The group that met worked together to ground that assumption. They began with two foundational principles.

*#1: All that we do is directed towards supporting the human spirit to thrive in each person.*

*#2: We continuously strive to eliminate policies and practices that diminish the human spirit.*

### Background

The culture change movement was formed as an antidote to the institutional culture of long-term care that is grounded in an extended hospital model rather than in habitats where people can thrive, live and die with dignity. The NASEM report concluded, "The way in which the United States finances, delivers, and regulates care in nursing home settings is ineffective, inefficient, fragmented, and unsustainable." An institutional culture of delivering nursing home care:

- Has been ineffective in achieving the basic deliverables required by federal law that assure quality care and a meaningful life for each person.
- Significantly contributed to the catastrophic loss of life of both residents and staff in nursing homes during the Covid pandemic.
- Driven up costs relative to the health and quality of life outcomes it has produced for individuals and their communities.

These failures, over decades, have disempowered the people who live and work in nursing homes. Rigid hierarchies, bad financial incentives and institutional design and thinking have prevented people from caring for each other as they pursue their unique potentials and needs. They also serve as obstacles to the advancement of person-directed care that is at the heart of Moving Forward's mission.

The Moving Forward Coalition believes that a better way is possible, and its seeds are already out there in nursing home communities across the country. For more than 50 years, communities, advocates and nursing home leaders have found ways to infuse care with autonomy, community, dignity, meaning, hope, excellent clinical support, effectiveness and accountability. They have cultivated imagination, innovation and a shared worldview grounded in expanding well-being, empowerment and an understanding that the whole system – top to bottom, inside out – is part of an interconnected, interactive whole.

They have found common cause in such values as love and respect, a belief in the potential of each person, and an inclusive, collaborative approach to decision making. They have wed effective outcomes and accountability to the liberation of the human spirit and an urgency to accelerate change. And they have developed a culture rooted in ancient wisdom, connected to the future and grounded in contemporary rituals and practices that promote joy, loving, warmth, dignity, choice and meaning – even when people are dying.

It's our job to work together to make this culture a reality in every nursing home.

## Guiding Concepts for a Culture that Honors the Human Spirit

The culture we aspire to derives from a shared set of beliefs that defines and harmonizes practice and policy and drives the system on all levels to support each person's empowerment, right to dignity, excellent care, and a life of meaning, joy, learning, and self-directed fulfillment of one's potential. These beliefs are validated through good practice based in meeting the deep human need to be heard, to be understood, to have choice, and to trust that each person's needs matter.

*Three Essential Qualities* will drive the continuing evolution of all aspects of the system towards greater congruency between our values and the actions and activities that continually regenerate a more loving, empowering culture. These qualities – Dignity, Equity and Accountability – are simultaneously aspirational and a work in continually accelerating progress.

**Dignity** | Each person is approached with kindness, listened to, and helped to express themselves and their needs. Each person is respected for who they are, where they come from, and for their potential to learn, grow and realize their aspirations for the future without being limited by our judgments, diagnoses, or clinical expectations. Each person lives in a physical environment most supportive of their individual needs, preferences, culture, and values.

**Equity** | Each person is treated fairly and receives the services, care and support they need and want. Each staff member is provided a living wage and helped to fulfill their potential and aspirations. Each community has access to the capital it needs to thrive: Homes are reimbursed and



funded robustly, at a level that covers the true cost of care, and returns reflect the quality of care provided. Historical disparities in care and quality of life will be addressed actively and honestly by everyone involved in delivering care. The services provided to older adults will positively impact the community around the nursing home and society at large.

**Accountability** | With the exception of resident confidentiality and legally protected personnel matters, the functioning of the whole system and all its parts will be transparent. Each person, organization and system are held responsible in measurable ways for working collaboratively to achieve continually improving performance outcomes. All homes – as well as their owners and other stakeholders – are held responsible for high quality care and consistently poor care is addressed in the way that best serves residents and the broader community.

## Our Aspirations for a Better Nursing Home Culture

It is important to have a common understanding of the nature and the attributes of the culture we are cultivating. The culture we aspire to:

- is growing, organic and fluid and centered on each person’s optimal well-being;
- sees each home as a community that supports dignity, respect, equity, connection to others, and flow of life – while providing opportunities to grow, be creative and thrive;
- honors the diverse traditions that make up our multicultural communities;
- provides each person with a living wage and an opportunity to grow professionally;
- is systemic – promoting collaboration and congruence between values and practice throughout all levels of the interdependent system;
- proliferates as a result of continuous learning and refinement of practice by each of us personally, interpersonally, and systemically;
- empowers leaders to use their authority to encourage participation in decision making;
- frames our work on all levels of the system as a calling to serve the greater good; and
- creates a physical environment designed to promote the individual’s wellbeing, be a home and align with the individual’s needs, preferences, and values.

