



Student “Mystery Shops” Identify Issues In Assisted Living/Senior Housing Marketing Practices

Fairfax, VA, *November 16, 2005* --- Students studying senior housing administration at George Mason University have completed telephone “mystery shops” of assisted living, Alzheimer’s care, and continuing care retirement communities – with some surprising results.

Despite a purchase value of \$100,000 or more for a single new resident, communities are frequently remiss in providing needed information to consumers calling in search of help. Students in the program, which offers the first curricula in the nation dedicated exclusively to senior housing, assume this role same role while pretending to seek housing for an elderly parent or grandparent. A total of 75 communities have been “shopped” to date, ranging from industry leading providers to single, privately owned homes. Results of the student’s surveys were presented last week during the annual conference of the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aged in San Antonio, Texas.

Andrew Carle, Assistant Professor and Founding Director of the program, noted that the industry has made significant progress in facility design and quality of care. However front line marketing – the point of first contact for most consumers – continues to show room for improvement. “There are some very helpful sales reps, but generally we’ve only learned to answer the phone in three rings, offer a tour, and mail a brochure.” Carle said, “We need to get beyond these basic criteria.” Among areas for improvement, students found marketing staff failed to ask the name of the potential resident nearly 20 percent of the time. “What does that say to a son or daughter in terms of how the community sees their parent as a person?” stated Carle.

In their own twist, students have identified “IPOD” characteristics common among marketing staff. “*Play*” is when staff recited a “memorized pitch” without regard to the specific needs of the potential resident. “*Pause*” is when they are reluctant or unable to offer information, forcing the caller to lead the conversation. “*Fast Forward*” results when staff jump ahead in an attempt to “close the deal”, but without providing sufficient information for the caller to make such a commitment. “*Shuffle*” is when information is presented in a random and disconnected fashion, leaving the caller confused. “The shuffle is by far the most common problem,” states Carle. “These can be extremely complicated arrangements.”

The biggest problem, says Carle, is that poor performance on the phone can reflect on an otherwise stellar community. "Many of the complaints you hear about senior housing have less to do with anything the community did wrong, than what was communicated prior to the resident moving in. When that miscommunication results in the resident not moving in at all, it's a loss for everyone involved. By sharing this information, we hope we can elevate industry performance at point of first contact."