

A New Senior Care Community in North Branch

In North Branch, care for seniors has gone state of the art

By Warren Wolfe

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NORTH BRANCH, MINN. -- For its day, the Chisago County Poor Farm in 1885 offered top-flight care. A mile from town, it was the place where people who were poor, aged and alone could survive on the farm's produce, plus a few dollars from the county.



The Green Acres Country Care Center built in 1959 in North Branch, Minn.

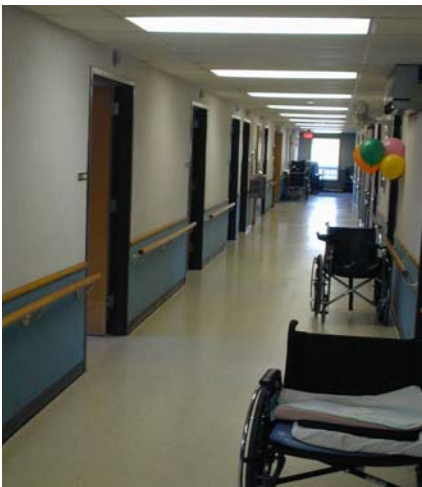
On Tuesday, the old poor farm -- for the past half-century the county-owned nursing home called Green Acres Country Care Center -- will close. The aging three-story brick structure 50 miles north of Minneapolis will be razed, a housing development rising in its place.

At 15-minute intervals Tuesday morning, small buses will carry the nursing home's 68 residents to their new home on the other side of town, the \$22 million Villages of North Branch -- as state of the art as

nursing homes come in Minnesota.

The new home represents several changes overtaking the industry -- the demise of

county-owned facilities and the growth of "campus" developments offering a range of nursing-home care and apartments, all broken into neighborhoods and layered with new technology.



Green Acres had cramped hallways and until recently had four people to a room in some places.

"This is going to be so different," said Carol Feakes, 71, a resident of Green Acres for four years. "My new room will be nice. But the rest of the place is so interesting that I don't think I'll be spending much time in my room anymore."

The old home has been managed for 18 years by Ecumen, a Shoreview-based nonprofit that owns and manages scores of nursing homes, assisted-living facilities and senior apartments in the Midwest.

A year ago, the county sold the home -- which had lost \$1.5 million since 2002 -- to Ecumen for \$1.

Few new nursing homes

Opening a new nursing home is a novel experience for most administrators, especially for Leah Killian-Smith, who on Tuesday will close her eighth home in a row.



Each neighborhood at The Villages has its own entry, eliminating the one-size fits all main entrance.

"I'd show up at a new home, and employees would say, 'Oh-oh, I better start looking for a new job.' "

More than 50 nursing homes have closed in Minnesota in the past decade, victims of tight finances and clients who are choosing to move into nicer, newer, less hospital-like assisted-living apartments.

"Nobody says, 'I want to move to a nursing home,' " said Steve Ordahl, Ecumen's senior vice president of business development. "You go to a nursing home as a last resort, when you need long-term 24-hour medical care."

Ecumen reflects the changing choices. By the end of this year, it will have closed 400 of the 1,300 nursing-home beds it had in 2003. At the same time, its assisted-living and other apartment units will have more than doubled to 1,330.

A growing trend



This aerial shot shows the various neighborhoods, including small memory care, rehab care and nursing care neighborhoods on the left.

Once common, 15 county-owned nursing homes remain in Minnesota, state officials say, and several are actively seeking buyers. In Hudson, Wis., St. Croix County officials said Friday they may close the county-owned home in New Richmond after negotiations to sell the facility broke down.

Only a few new homes have been built in recent years, a process that requires state approval because there are more beds than clients to fill them.

But nearly all new homes reflect the kinds of changes evident in the new Villages of North Branch -- an eye to design, technology and "making this place reflect life at home, not life in an institution," Killian-Smith said.

"Don't get me wrong. The workers and residents in Green Acres become like family, the care is good and the move will not be easy for everybody," she said. "But at Villages of North Branch, it will be clear the moment you walk in the door that this is not your traditional nursing home."

New approach

For one thing, it's not just a nursing home.

From the cafe and gift shop in the "village center" lobby, the 128,000-square-foot building looks different. Fireplaces, bookcases, easy chairs and couches are scattered throughout.

The new building -- five times the size of the old one -- houses 51 assisted-living apartments, 20 memory-care apartments and 68 nursing-home rooms, including some offering short-term care for people recovering from illness or surgery.



The Villages features a variety of gathering areas from cafes to libraries.

Instead of Green Acres' long hallways flanked by double rooms -- and a couple rooms with four beds -- the new home has all private rooms except for a few for spouses. Even the new double rooms have a divider.

The dark hallways of Green Acres are replaced by wider, airier, brighter halls that lead to neighborhood pods of 17 rooms each.

Each neighborhood has its own kitchen for breakfast and snacks, its own dining area and living room and often its own staff. Residents will rise and go to bed when they want, their schedules no longer dictated by meal times.

And the workers, no longer dressed in scrubs, have been trained to handle more duties. So a nursing assistant may cook breakfast to order for a resident, offer medications, do a load of laundry, join one resident in activities and later take another for a walk.

Gone will be the paper reports charting each resident's care. Touch-pad technology in each neighborhood lets a worker log the care as it's given. Another set of buttons lets aides and nurses track the time they spend in each resident room.

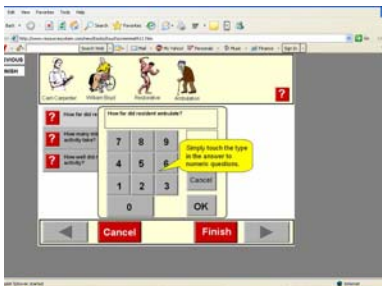
And the call light of old now doesn't just light up at a resident's door, but also calls an aide's cell phone.

More than 50 computers with Internet access are spread throughout -- for use of staff and residents.

Industry changing

In all, "what they're doing at North Branch is what the industry is trying to achieve -- a culture of people-centered care that's built on technology in a home that's really

efficient," said Patti Cullen, president of the trade association Care Providers of Minnesota.



"Most older homes are inefficient and built wrong for this new approach," she said. "As much as we're able to afford it, nursing homes will move that direction."

Touch screen Caretracker technology frees up caregivers to spend more time with residents and less time on paperwork.

Affording it is not easy matter. Most operate with miniscule operating margins, and some are losing money because their costs exceed what the state allows them to charge.

Ecumen's decision to build was helped by the county's selling it the old home for \$1 -- which it has sold to a developer for \$2.2 million -- and a retired farmer's decision to sell it the new 20-acre site, valued at \$1.2 million, for \$190,000.

"We're able to provide this kind of service because a lot of people have helped us," Killian-Smith said. "Now it's our job to show the community how, with that help, we're providing the kind of care that makes them proud."